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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

**Surviving ISIS: Life Stories of Yezidi Women**

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A Thesis Submitted to  
The Middle East Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts  
In Middle East Studies

By: Marian Rizkalla  
12/1/2018

***School of Global Affairs and Public Policy***

***Middle East Studies Center***

***Surviving ISIS: Life Stories of  
Yezidi Women***

A Thesis Submitted by

Marian Mounir Rizkalla

To the Department of *Middle East Studies*

December 2018

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
has been approved by

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Nabil Fahmy, Ambassador

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Date

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To the survivors of the Yazidi genocide

## **Acknowledgments**

Mum, dad, Nardeen, Sylvia, Michael and Youssef, I couldn't have wished for a better family! Thank you for your love, your selflessness and for supporting me not just with this project but in every aspect of life. To my friends who are like family thank you for being there throughout the years. I want to specially thank Rana, Sandra, Sandy and Ahmed for pushing me forward and believing in me. Thank you Miriam, Magdy, Wael, Hany, Ihab ,Carmen, Amany, Iman, Basma, Nancy, Ayah, Shorouk, Menna, Ashraf, Christine, Amir, Roqayah, Mirna, Mina, Nora, Heidi and Magda for all your practical help, emotional support and advice.

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## Preface

*“Why study I-raq... isn’t I-raq just sand and war?”* an American friend asked.

I must say I was thrilled by the question. My friend had simply forgotten that we were having this conversation in Cairo and only a few weeks ago in her imagination, Egypt was just camels and pyramids. For my friend, Cairo was now a familiar place but Iraq was a distant land of sand and war. If anything, my friend’s honest question reveals how we construct the “other” in our minds, but more importantly how fluid and constantly changing this construction of the other is. Many years ago, European powers divided their colonial subjects into three main zones – the Near, Middle and Far East. I grew up learning that the second of these, the Middle-East, where I was born (told I was) and lived most of my life, is the source of the world’s troubles. My interest to study this conflict-prone region grew, but so did my confusion every time I realized that the definition and geographic location of the Middle-East was constantly changing. It is for that reason that I hope to encourage my reader to challenge the absolutes and question stereotypes about the Middle-East. This research is a very humble attempt to show a reality about the “other” that may not often appear in the newspaper or in television.

I must also say that my plan to do fieldwork and study “the other” was only half the equation. I ended up also studying myself. Being in the field and facing all kinds of physical, environmental and emotional stressors meant that I was at times observing myself like I was watching a film in the theatre. I began to question my own identity; as a Christian I thought I would be welcomed by other Christians but more often than not I was excluded because I was not Catholic and did not speak Aramaic. As an Egyptian, I was not welcomed by many Egyptians because I did not fit their notion of a “typical” Egyptian female. At times I felt confused about the role I should

take or the role that the participants expected or wanted me to take. I was functioning both as a researcher and a volunteer and with that came the expectation that I was also a counsellor, but I was also there just as a human-being.

At first those roles and the expectations that came with them were restricting and isolating, but as I began to develop rapport with the women I began not only to gain more knowledge or information but depth, and with that came the issue of emotional labour. Emotional labour is a topic that is often sidetracked and ignored once the research is published and the feeling of achievement prevails. For me, the issue of emotional labour was a present reality that I cannot hide or run away from; it continues to resurface every time I revisit the material. The memory of a father carrying his daughter after trying to commit suicide for the fifth time, a mother receiving news that her son drowned as an illegal migrant in an attempt to reach fortress Europe, stories of missing children, lost love, and rape that left the victim alive but dead. Most of the time I did not even have an immediate reaction given the intensity of the accounts, but for days, weeks, even now as I write, I'm visited by feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and grieve ... I had turned into a wounded researcher!





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## **Introduction**

My research centers on the experiences of five Yezidi female refugees in Kurdistan and how they survived the ISIS siege of their hometown- Sinjar. Yezidis, an ethno-religious community living in northern Iraq were the center of most news stories for the massacres they faced under ISIS and the sex-enslavement of thousands of them. This research attempts to show how a large-scale event like genocide impacts the life of the individual on the micro-level, but also how individual narratives are instrumental in constructing a collective identity, presenting Yezidis as a historically persecuted group. By examining sectarian relations in Iraq before and after the American invasion of 2003, the research situates the Yezidi genocide within the context of sectarian politics in the nation-state. Personal narratives are used as the main methodology to portray how each woman uniquely experienced and remembers the fall of Sinjar, the survival phase and how she lives as a refugee in the aftermath. The impact that trauma has on memory is an important element of the personal narratives but also speak of the collective Yezidi experience.

### **Structure of the Thesis:**

The chapters of this research can be seen as a journey taking the reader through different dimensions of the story of the Yezidi genocide. In the introduction I present my own experience in doing the fieldwork in 2016, two years after the genocide. Through my experience I highlight several factors that may be relevant to researchers doing fieldwork in Iraq like language, safety and encountering the other while also being encountered as the other. Chapter one examines the Yezidi genocide within the larger debate over the conceptual and legal definition of the crime of Genocide. It also provides background on Yezidis, the victims of this genocide as well as political and historical factors that led to the rise of the perpetrators –ISIS by examining sectarian relations

within the state of Iraq before and after the American invasion of 2003. The way in which sexual violence has become characteristic of the Islamic state but also inherently overlaps with war in a universal sense is also examined. Chapter two covers the methodology by looking at narrative theory and how narrative was used as the main methodology in this research and how it serves as a tool for the survivor to articulate and make sense of their world. Chapter three presents the five main interlocutors paving the way to Chapter four which focuses on the accounts given by those women on the siege and fall of Sinjar. Chapter five is a continuation of the narratives focusing on how each woman survived; those who were captured, those who hid in the mountain and those who remained and eventually managed to escape. The final chapter is an Epilogue, examining the refugee problem both in terms of security and the representation of the traumatized victim. This chapter also sheds light on several aspects of recovery and how the women do life in the aftermath of the events, both on the individual level and at the level of the community.

### **Doing the Fieldwork**

The main concern that is usually raised when discussing research in volatile places like Iraq is the issue of safety. To begin with it is important to differentiate Kurdistan or Northern Iraq from the rest of Iraq. From my experience having visited Kurdistan twice, once in Erbil and once in Dohuk, this place has generally been very safe. Despite the proximity of cities that were still under the control of ISIS, Dohuk was very a very safe city particularly in the day in day out. There is no harassment, women can walk alone at night and transportation is very safe.

Accessibility is another important factor because sometimes conflict zones are imagined as places out of reach. Travelling to Kurdistan is as easy as going to any part of the world. There are direct flights from Frankfurt, Cairo, Amman and Istanbul to Erbil. Dohuk is a three-hour drive from Erbil airport which means that transportation is needed to reach Dohuk. Erbil however was

completely different from Dohuk, where most of the refugee camps are located. Erbil was a city with sky scrapers, gated compounds, huge malls, extremely extravagant restaurants and International schools. There were people from all over the world; Mexicans, Dutch, Americans, Koreans, Scottish, Danish and Indians.

Language was one of the areas where I had experienced some difficulty. The majority of Kurds speak Arabic fluently so I did not have an issue in the daily encounters with the Kurdish population but language was a barrier when doing the fieldwork. Many of the Yezidi women I met were originally village inhabitants and therefore some did not go to school or did not need to master Arabic in the same way that city dwellers would. Another important factor was that many women simply refused to speak Arabic after the events of 2014. Many times, at the start of a conversation, a respondent would express her inability to speak Arabic but half way through the conversation when she felt more comfortable, she would switch to Arabic. It is worth mentioning that Yezidism is not just a religion but it is an ethnoreligious identity. For many Yezidis, preserving the language of their ethnic community was a vital component of resistance because Arabic was now the language of the enemy. There was also another legitimate reason for their refusal of Arabic; it was the simple fact that many of them are traumatized. Many of those girls were raped and humiliated by Arab speaking ISIS militants; the idea of hearing the same language again with its various dialects stimulated the trauma once again.

What was particularly interesting is that while I was welcomed at every occasion for being a Christian, be it by Kurds or Yezidis, this was not always the case with other Christians in Bekhitmy- the village where I was staying. Bikhetmy was a modest village in Dohuk with a predominantly Christian population with exception of a few Shiite families. For my Christian neighbors, it was a shame that I could not speak their “Christian Language” which is the Syriac

dialect of Aramic– an ancient language that is still used by some Christian communities is Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. It was a greater shame that I was not a Catholic. To my luck, they were fond of Egyptians for refusing the government of the Muslim Brotherhood and they all expressed their admiration of Egyptian cinema particularly the famous actor, Adel Imam.

The time I spent with the neighbors was of great value and their stories were deeply enriching. Each of the neighbors had moved to Dohuk at a certain point in time due to war or persecution. There were those who served in the war on Iran, there were those who moved because they had encountered religious persecution under Saddam and there were those who longed for the days when Saddam was president. It was interesting to note that despite this being a predominantly Christian, the political views I heard were as diverse as Iraq's sects but there was unanimous agreement even among the elderly who have served in wars that there was nothing worse than ISIS.

### **Challenges**

The biggest challenge I faced was getting the necessary connections to do the fieldwork. My initial plan was to interview female survivors who have experienced sexual assault only. Accordingly, I was trying to establish connections with local and International human-trafficking NGOs. Things seemed to be working well when I was in Cairo but as soon as I arrived all the plans had changed. I received several apologies from various NGOs. Many of the girls who were at first willing to share their stories changed their minds. They were getting tired of media intrusion and strangers coming to see what it was like to be Yezidi and to be raped. I was told that I should have come earlier, Yezidis were much more willing to open up and share their stories but now they were just tired. If anything, those failed attempts were indicative of some important truths. Yezidis are in essence a very secretive and conservative group and being subject to public opinion and constant

intrusion from strangers is in many ways foreign to their nature. The second important truth was an indication of the emotional state the girls were in. Two years after the siege, the urge to speak and the exhilaration of being rescued or having escaped was now gone and they were now faced with the terrible routine of life, which made it difficult for them to revisit those closed chapters. I had to refigure out ways to do this and this involved expanding my research to examine how different women and not just enslaved women experienced the siege.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Using the “G” word**

2 August, 2014, the day before ISIS captures Sinjar was a public holiday celebrating the end of a fasting season named in honor of Sheikh Adi. Families gathered with their relatives to celebrate the feast by slaughtering sheep and handing out sweets. It was common in the past to find Muslim neighbors join their Yezidi neighbors in such celebrations but in the last couple of years this was no longer the scene. At around dusk, unfamiliar vehicles began to appear and rumors were spreading about ISIS militants taking the city over. Those rumors however, soon turned out to be facts (Otten, 2017). Around 6,383 Yezidis, the majority of whom were women and children were held as captives, and later transported to prisons, military training camps, and the homes of ISIS militants across eastern Syria and western Iraq where they were raped, tortured and trafficked into slave markets. By 2016, 2,590 women and children managed to escape or were bought by smugglers but 3,793 remain in captivity. At least 3 thousand Yezidis were killed, many more executed, and the rest were left to die in the mountain as a result of injuries, starvation and dehydration (Otten, 2017).

Throughout this work, the term I consciously and consistently use to refer to the Yezidi atrocity is Genocide. Despite this being the chosen framework through which Yezidis choose to remember the traumatic event of 3, August, 2014, and the International community led by the U.S secretary of State, John Kerry acknowledged that ISIS is a genocidal group, it remains important

to note that using a term like genocide is not as straightforward as it appears to be and has created much controversy.

To begin with, how do we know that Genocide is happening? The answer to that is simply because we are told it is (Mamdani, 2009). The reason why one term may be used to refer to one atrocity and not the other, why one place is labelled Genocide, and another place war or insurgency has do with what Mamdani calls “the politics of naming” (Mamdani, 2007). Writing in 2007, the writer notes that while the conflict in Congo, which has been the most lethal conflict since WWII, received little attention from the United States, thousands of Americans rallied against the “genocide” in Darfur for the mere fact that in the former Congo militia were U.S trained, while in the latter, the perpetrators are known to be Arabs killing African victims. More so, why is it that the conflict in Darfur was labelled genocide while the U.S invasion of Iraq, both happening at the same time, was labelled as insurgency or counter-insurgency (Mamdani, 2007)?

### **The Politics of Naming**

Understanding the politics of naming is particularly substantial when it comes to the Yezidi situation. This does not mean that what happened to Yezidis in 2014 is anything less than genocide or to undermine the magnitude of the atrocity but it is rather to shed light to political factors that must be examined when using terms like Genocide. Once we hear that Genocide is happening somewhere, our minds automatically associate this with examples we have seen elsewhere; the holocaust, Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia just to name a few, are all examples that our minds replay as soon as the word Genocide is mentioned. In our consciousness this turns into a confrontation between good and evil, and a need for a savior is awakened, but the conflict in Iraq shows us that the situation is much more complex. The role that the U.S plays in being the “savior” of minorities targeted by the evil genocidaires-ISIS deserves much scrutiny. A curious examination

of Iraqi politics shows that the ISIS crisis cannot be treated in isolation of the long history of U.S involvement in Iraq since 2003 and the heightened sectarian divisions that resulted. The U.S strategy following the occupation was based on the deliberate balkanization of the state much like the military intervention in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan (Shihade, 2009). This was first achieved through ‘de-Bathifying’ the nation leading to anarchy, followed by the active entrenchment of sectarian politics and the empowerment of certain communities over the others. This did not only result in destroying the delicate social fabrics of society, but more destructively, led to the rise of extremism which climaxed into genocide.

One must also question the effectiveness of the conceptual and legal framework in preventing the crime of Genocide from happening. For Raphael Lemkin, hunting for a term that could confront the crime and express the vandalism committed by Hitler against the Jews was essential to prevent the crime from happening but it was only the first step. Combining the Greek derivative geno, meaning “race” and the latin derivative cide which means “killing”, Lemkin coined the word Genocide to name the crime without name (Lemkin, 1944). Despite it gaining worldwide popularity and its immediate integration into the dictionary, naming the crime was not enough to stop it from happening; law had to step in (Power, 2002). It would take several years for Lemkin to develop a legal framework to criminalize genocide. In 1948 the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defined genocide as any of the following act committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

A) Killing members of the group;

B) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

- C) Deliberately inflicting on the group the conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- D) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- E) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

In reality however, the Genocide convention achieved little. Not only are there limitations with the convention in terms of how “the intent” to kill or destroy can be identified and defined or in its inability to address protection of people who may be persecuted for political and economic reasons and not just religious or ethnic reasons, but more importantly the convention achieved little in practice. It took the U.S forty years to ratify the Genocide convention and it took fifty years for the International community to convict anyone of genocide, even the countries that did ratify the convention never invoked it to punish Genocide (Power, 2002). In her timeless work, “A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide, Samantha Power (2002) takes her reader through every major genocide and in every case, the writer contends that time and again the International Community led by the United States, despite having enough evidence, have failed to respond. The end result is that we have all been bystanders to genocide (Power, 2002). I would argue however, that in some cases the International community did take action but in the wrong way. This was clear in Cambodia when the United States chose to side with a genocidal state killing its people over Vietnam a country hostile to the United States. Then again, in backing Saddam Hussein’s regime while he exterminated the Kurds and in Bosnia where the Clinton administration shifted language over the course of the conflict from that of Genocide to civil war because saving Bosnian lives was not deemed worth risking American soldiers and because America did not want to upset its European allies who wanted to remain neutral (Power, 2002). In all those examples, the International community could not acknowledge or prevent genocide from

happening despite the presence of a legal and conceptual framework. It took two years for the U.N to recognize the ISIS's campaign as genocide and even then it was described as "ongoing", despite the presence of a Genocide Convention (Dearden, 2017).

This problematization of the word genocide should not be taken as a green light to abandon the conceptual and legal framework. We cannot criticize the U.S for using double-standards to serve American interest if we did not have a set of guidelines that tell us what genocide is and what it is not. Instead, they should be the entry point to ask questions of why they are applied in certain areas and not others, who has the power to name and how does it conform or contradict with the agenda of western super powers. These questions help unearth the heart of the conflict rather than beguile us into a simple binary scheme of saviors and survivors.

In the case of Yezidis, the concept of genocide is even more problematic. One must be careful in making a case that ISIS is a genocidal group and not just a terrorist group committing acts against humanity because genocide has often been linked to the nation state attempting to kill a specific group of people based on their identity be it ethnic or religious (Whiteside, 2015). Historical examples beginning with the Armenian genocide, the Jewish Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide were all performed by state-actors towards their populations. Before making a case for genocide, it is necessary to provide a background on the victims and the perpetrators of this conflict and how sectarian relations evolved within the state of Iraq.

### **Who are the Yezidis?**

Yezidis are an ethnoreligious community; the majority has lived in Jabal Sinjar, a mountainous area rising in the upper northern Jazira plateau, ninety kilometers southwest of Mosul. Other Yazidis inhabited the Shaikhan district, located between the Mosul plain and the Kurdish mountains, and in the Kurdish districts of Zakhu and Dohuk (Fuccaro, 1997). Yezidis of Iraq are Kurdish in ethnicity but speak a Kurdish dialect known as Krumanji (Hanish, 2009). Northern Iraq has always been considered the homeland of Yazidis since the 12th century, when Yezidism started to revive among Kurdish population.

The Yezidi religious revival was led by 'Adi ibn Musafir (ca. 1075-1162), an Arab Sufi shaykh whom the Yezidis consider the saintly founder or, according to a different tradition, the reviver of their religion (Fuccaro, 1997). The idiosyncrasies of Yezidism are not only limited to the integration of various elements from different religions be it Sufism, Shi'ite sects, pre-Islamic beliefs, Sunnism or Christianity, the uniqueness of Yezidism lies in it being both a religion and an ethnic identity, which define the belonging of its followers to the Ezdik-hana. Yezidism is known to be a secretive religion; outsiders are provided with minimal and superficial information about the theology and practices of the religion. The senjaqs, which are images of a peacock symbolising Malak Tawus, are a perfect example of this mysteriousness, very few non-Yezidis have ever seen any of these images, and least of all the one kept secretly in Armenia (Nicolaus, 2011). Similarly, the symbolism of the black snake remains mysterious and inaccessible to non-Yezidis. The reason for such mysteriousness could easily be attributed to the fact that for centuries Yezidis have suffered several persecutions. In response to the constant perceived threat, Yezidis developed the practice of hiding certain mythological concepts from non-Yezidis as a way of protecting themselves. But given their minority status, concealing such information which may be sensitive or offensive to the feelings of their neighbors is an “accommodative approach” to help

them survive and become more accepted by the other. Yezidis attempt to find common language with their neighbors to create a tolerant environment, rather than on stubbornly insisting on strange dogmas and beliefs that may repulse others (Nicolaus, 2011).

One explanation of the sacredness of the black serpent is that the serpent played a role in their flood myth by helping save Noah's ark as recited in the Mash'afā-ṛāš, ("Black Book", or more correctly "Black Writing") (Nicolaus, 2011), which is why every Yezidi must keep a symbol of the serpent as a reminder of its religious significance. The Peacock Angel, Malak-Tawus is a central figure in the Yezidi faith, as all divine functions were transferred by God, Khawade to Malak-Tawus and he is regarded as the source of origin of all Yezidis. This is why Yezidis call themselves milate Malak-Tawus, or "people of Malak Tawus". The wide belief that Yezidis worship the devil rises from the fact that the word Say'an which refers to the peacock angel literally translates into the word Al- Shay'tan which is the Arabic for Satan (Hanish, 2009). They are the most oppressed religion in Iraq because their religion and beliefs are misunderstood by Muslims as devil-worshippers and they are not considered "People of the Book" as Christians and Jews are (Hanish, 2009).

The epicenter of Yezidism is in the city of Lalish, not far from the city of Dohuk. Lalish Consists of a collection of temples constructed around the tomb of the Sufi Mystic Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, Every Yezidi ought to make a pilgrimage to Lalish at least once in his or her lifetime (Otten, 2017). Yezidis believe that the universe was created by God from a pearl that split on his command and gave out light and water. He created seven angels who were put in charge of making the earth, and Lalish was the start.

Although most Yezidis were sedentary and semi-nomadic agriculturalists and cattle breeders, the community played a significant role in the development of ethnic politics in northern

Iraq. They form the second-largest non-Muslim community and the largest heterodox Kurdish group settled in the Mosul province. Their geographic location, being settled in the border with Syria and Turkey was of great significance to the Iraqi state since 1918, because controlling this area became strategically vital to safe guard its position in the new regional order created by the colonial powers (Fuccaro, 1997). Until the late 1930s, Yezidi Kurds of Jabal Sinjar continued to be a pre-national community, and despite the fact that there were different tribal affiliations within the Yezidi community, group solidarity mainly depended on primordial ties of ethnicity and religion.

Their contiguous settlement within the boundaries of mount Sinjar reinforced their distinctiveness as an ethnoreligious group among a predominantly Sunni region and acted as a powerful catalyst for group mobilization in times of conflict against the other. Although, Yezidis shared many social and culture ties with their Sunni counterparts living in southern Kurdistan, yet contact between those two Kurdish communities was scarce and tension between Yezidis and their Muslim neighbors has deep historic roots (Fuccaro, 1997). Under Ottoman administration, Yezidis were subject to religious discrimination and many were forced to convert to Islam. This created deep resentment between Yezidis who were refusing to be ruled by a leader who is not a member of the community and Sunni Kurds and Arabs (Fuccaro, 1997). This resentment would translate into an issue of state security when Syria which was governed by the French raised claims that the western part of Mount Sinjar should be part of the Syrian Jazira, despite it having being administered by the British and later Iraqi authorities since 1919. The threat grew when French officials who were in frequent contact with Yezidi tribesmen, began to support Yezidi claims against conscription in the Iraqi army as a way of extending their influence in the mountain. Many Yezidis started to migrate from Iraq seeking Syrian protection. The Iraqi government has often



depicted the French policy of resettlement of non-Arab elements particularly of Kurds and Assyrians, as synonymous with the settlement of non-Arabs into Palestine by the Zionists (Fuccaro, 1997).

### **Sectarian relations and the nation-state**

While the focus of this research is on the Yezidi community, one cannot examine the Yezidi case without looking at sectarian relations within the nation-state of Iraq as a whole. The birth of the nation-state of Iraq led to different religious and ethnic communities being bound to the boundaries of one governing unit. The nation-state provides us with a deep understanding of how sectarian relations evolved in Iraq and gives context to the Yezidi genocide of 2014. The nation-state, which in essence is a modern European phenomenon, was replicated around the world through colonialism (Shihade, 2009). The project of building a nation state had to follow a process of imagining the nation in the first place and then creating boundaries through which people who are imagined to be members of this nation-state would fall under. Those boundaries define who would be included and excluded, depending on the extent to which those people fit the prototype of the imagined nation state and can be homogenized (Shihade, 2009).

Communal and ethnic categorization were established and used by colonial powers from the moment the nation-state of Iraq was conceived. This does not mean that there has always been peaceful coexistence between different communities in the 500 years of Ottoman rule, after all Sunni-Shiite animosity dates back to 680 CE (Holden, 2012) and a realistic examination of this period reveals several incidents of religious discrimination (Holden, 2012) (David et al, 2017). The issue however is that the framework of the nation-state rather than creating developed and unified political entities that can live in harmony as hoped for, created structures of discrimination

based on religion and ethnicity that have an enduring effect and in many cases still influence those nations, long after colonial rule has ended (Shihade, 2009).

The Iraqi nation-state was born as a monarchy under British rule in 1920. With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the British decided to unite the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, which now constitute what we know as “Iraq”. This setup meant that the Mosul province which was mainly inhabited by Sunni Kurds, Baghdad province which was predominantly occupied by Sunni Arabs and the Basra province occupied by Shi’ites would become a joined entity, under a centralized government (Abdi, 2008). Each province had been previously granted a high degree of autonomy under Ottoman rule which explains why sectarian tension was less eminent than it would later be under the nation- state.

Adding to the complicated ethno-religious composition was the fact that the newly established state relied significantly on Sunni Arabs to run state affairs. The British preferred to appoint loyal Iraqis who were willing to collaborate both politically and economically with the colonial powers and this was to be found in the Sunni Arabs who were a minority forming 20% of the population (Sluglett, 2010). In this sense sectarian tension was the result of discriminating colonial policies towards Shiites who formed a numerical majority. It is worth noting that despite the common perception of deeply rooted animosity between Shi’ites and Sunnis, history reveals that there were times of unity between the two sects; the revolt of 1920 which called for an independent Iraqi state against British rule reveals a Sunni-Shiite unity. This unity was rather short lived because as the Sunnis realized that the British were not going to withdraw from Iraq, they had to quickly realign themselves again with the British (Sluglett, 2010). It is important to note that although Iraq gained independence in 1932, Britain continued to have geostrategic interest in Iraq and continued to orchestrate the political scene until 1958 (Bashkin, 2009).

The radical demands of the Shiite clergy meant that their incorporation within the kind of Iraq that the colonial powers had imagined was almost impossible, and consequently they were secluded from any formal political representation. To justify their discriminatory policies, the British have very often portrayed the Shiite leadership as fanatics and opposed to progress, while the Sunnis being more cooperative were the more secular and progressive group (Sluglett, 2010).

In the case of the Kurds, the incorporation within the newly established state was an unanticipated misfit because they regarded themselves a distinct ethnic group that should not be part of Arab Iraq. The area of land which they have inhabited known as Kurdistan, has been known throughout history even before the creation of the Iraqi state as “Bilad Al-Akrad” which literally means the land of the Kurds. The Kurds right to autonomous rule had initially been planned by the British and recognized in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 (Yildiz, 2011). Nonetheless, the plan for Kurdish independence was altered due to disputes of who was entitled to rule the area. The British resolved this by restoring the area which was subject to the Treaty of Sèvres to Turkish sovereignty; and the rest of the land was divided between Iran and the new state of Iraq (Rydgren et al, 2016). Ever since the integration of Mosul to the Iraqi state, the Kurds have continually opposed Arab administration with five violent uprisings erupting only in the period between 1921-1936 (Dawisha, 2013).

Assyrians were another ethnic Christian group that had a troubling history with the Ottomans that continued and heightened with the establishment of the state of Iraq. After World War I, the remnants of Assyrian refugees were taken by the British to settle in Mosul, Iraq (Zubaida, 2000). Assyrians, like the Kurds feared a centralized government but they welcomed British rule. Being Christian, gave them a sense of privilege because of their special connection with Christian Europe and accordingly they became servants to the British whom they regarded as

their colonial masters. The British exploited this by forming battalions of Assyrian armed men to protect the borders of the emerging state and then to suppress Kurdish rebellions. Their loyalty to the British meant that the Assyrians were now facing rejection from the entire population; Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen (Zubaida, 2000). However, this privileged relationship turned into a bloody massacre when Assyrian claims for independence did not match the agenda of the British, and certainly not the government in Baghdad (Zubaida, 2000). In 1933, dispute between Assyrians and the Iraqi army supported by the British culminated in what became known as the massacre of Simmel (Zubaida, 2000).

During this nation building project, the army had a significant role in influencing the nationalist discourse as it became a symbol of modern nationhood. Tribal, ethnic and religious identities were regarded as part of the backwardness of the past and the concern for minorities was part of a colonial conspiracy that aimed at dividing Iraqi society. Within this discourse, the nationalist project modeled on Kemalist Turkey, was a meeting point that would unite all Iraqis towards the pursuit of secular ambition (Zubaida, 2000). This noble ambition did not often materialize in reality, due to the pre-established power structures, the army, the symbol of Iraqi unity, became the source of sectarian strife.

Army conscription was a source of constant sectarian tension between Yezidis who had to redefine communal solidarities and the Iraqi nation state. The process of nation building took its harsh course on Yezidis in 1935, enforcing universal conscription into the Iraqi army. While conscription theoretically should have meant the integration of Yezidis as part of the nation, the government continued to promote discriminatory policies by supporting Sunni colonization of mount Sinjar. This led to a revolt by Yezidi tribesmen, which resulted in severe violence and the mass migration of many Yezidis into neighboring Syria (Fuccaro, 1997).

Remarkably, the sectarian nature of the state was not always a source of contention but has contributed in a significant way to the development of a pluralistic public sphere, enriching intellectual life in Iraq (Bashkin, 2009). The interactions between colonizers and colonized, as well as a diversity of sects fused into one nation system, in a time when Iraq was awakened to a wave of regional Arab nationalism, has as a matter of fact contributed to the hybrid nature of Iraqi culture (Bashkin, 2009). This in turn created a shared universe of discourse in the intellectual world, where Jewish, Christians, Sunnis and Shiite intellectual were preoccupied with the same ideas (Bashkin, 2009).

What the state failed to do during those years of nation-building was to develop a more inclusionary rhetoric of Iraqi nationalism that could unify all Iraqis to a unique heritage of their own. The tendency to adopt Arab nationalism was much more powerful mainly due to the fact that the ruling elite of Iraqi society, starting with the king and his Sharifian companions were strong advocates of Arab nationalism. In addition to this, the majority of those who controlled the country's politics and the army were Sunni Arab elites. The strategy that this ruling minority took was to mold all the different sects of Iraq into a broader Arab project that would serve their interests (Dawisha, 2013). This was clear in the realm of education where a policy of systematic Arabization of the Kurds was implemented as a way to deny Kurds of their distinctive history (Raafat, 2016). Similarly, Iraqi History was interpreted through a purely Sunni lens giving the Shiites a much limited and rather negative role in the history of Iraq (Dawisha, 2013).

With the rise of the Ba'ath regime, a raid of violence swept across the country. The new regime's strategy was to eradicate all that remained from Hashemite Iraq, which also included the torture and killing of thousands of Iraqis (Yildiz, 2011). Shiite groups, who were tolerated in the past, were now constantly being attacked by the Ba'ath and many of its members executed and

detained. Many Shiite exiles moved to Iran where they received massive support and funds from the Iranian revolutionary guards' corps (Ismael & Fuller, 2008). This led to further discrimination of Shiites for their association with Iran, resulting in a large uprising in 1977, when the regime tried to prevent Shiite pilgrims from going on foot to the Shiite holy city of Karbala to visit the holy shrine of Imam Hussein (Ismael & Fuller, 2008).

In 1979, Saddam Hussein came to power and began a more brutal campaign against Iraqi opposition which consisted of Iraqis from all the different political currents; Islamists, Kurdish, nationalists, leftist and Liberal (Bayati, 2011). It is worth noting that Saddam continued to promote the legacy of primordial affiliations of the British administrative structure. The easiest way to guarantee social stability at the lowest possible cost was to preserve what was known in colonial circles as the "natural order" of society by forming alliances with tribal sheikhs (Bunton, 2008).

Saddam's decision to invade Iran in September 1980 had serious implications on the country's Shiite community who were constantly being attacked for their religious affiliation with Iran as well as the Kurdish opposition who had been forming alliances with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Yildiz, 2011). The Iraqi regime sought to end the threat of a Kurdish-Iranian alliance once for all through continuous attacks on the Kurdish regions which started in 1980 and continued until 1991. The Anfal campaign which derives its name from a Koranic verse referring to the spoils of the holy war, was used by the Baathist military to refer to a series of raids where chemical weapons were systematically used against the Kurds in the spring and summer of 1988 causing the death of up to 180,000 people (Lemerchand, 2011).

The sanctions imposed by the U.N following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait also had serious implications on sectarian relations. The declining economy caused the emigration of middle-class,

educated Iraqis, which had a substantial effect on the rebuilding of the country in the post war era. But it also meant that the educated class who would have most likely strove for a balanced, cohesive society were no longer present and given the fact that the Ba'ath had made every attempt to crush civil society during the 70s and 80s meant that people had no support to turn to in such a time of distress except that of tribal and communal solidarities (Yousif, 2010). The Ba'ath strategy during this period was to hamper any possible rebellion through divide and rule. Religion and ethnicity were not the primary concern of the regime so long as they expressed their loyalty to the regime. This meant that while the majority of the population was devastated by the sanctions, an emerging class of nouveaux riches; Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs and Kurds with strong ties to the regime had actually benefitted from the sanctions (Yousif, 2010).

The Yezidi community has been subject to forced deportation under Saddam Hussein, during the economic meltdown of the sanctions era, and the breakdown of the state and security after the US-led invasion of 2003. The process of Arabization of minorities that started during the 1970s affected Yezidis among other groups. They were forced to identify themselves as Arabs and they could neither study their religion nor worship freely in schools. Saddam's government demolished 150 Yazidi villages, moving them to what the government called "modern villages". The targeting of Yezidis continued in the post 2003 era, where they were continually targeted by Islamic groups. Mass killings of Yezidis climaxed during the 2007 civil war. On August 14, 2007, over 500 Yezidis were killed in a single day during multiple coordinated truck bombs (Mullaney, 2016). Two months prior to the attacks, 25 Yezidi textile workers were shot to death by a group of terrorists who stopped their bus and allowed the Muslims to flee but killed the rest of the Yezidis (Hanish, 2009).

### **Iraq Post-2003: A womb for terrorism**

The Islamic state of Iraq (ISI) or The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant did not suddenly fall from the sky, the advent of this militant group is directly linked to the political turmoil in Iraq that started since 2003 and continued to escalate. The strategy used by the United States was no different than what the British colonizers did many decades before. The difference was that the U.S turned the table over the Sunni ruling minority in favor of the Shiite majority, causing a sudden imbalance of power that could easily erupt into violence in the absence of state apparatuses which were purposefully eradicated by the U.S (Shihade, 2009). The 'de-Ba'thification' process did not only involve the removal of Saddam's regime or his government but it also included the abolishment of at least 29 different Iraqi institutions; including the army, the state bureaucracy, security and intelligence apparatuses as well as non-military institutions leaving thousands of Iraqis unemployed, the majority of which were Sunnis (Abdulrazaq & Stanfield, 2016).

Cultural cleansing was a significant tactic of the 'de-Bathification' process that aimed at eradicating any remains of the past that tied the nation together. This included the destruction of museums, archaeological sites that were Iraq's Mesopotamian legacy, the change in school curriculum to pro-American rhetoric and more viciously the targeting of the intellectual literati of the country. As early as September 2004, Two hundred of the most prominent Iraqi academics were assassinated (Ismael & fuller, 2008).

Following the eradication of any traces of the past regime, the U.S and its allies began to lay the foundations of a new government that would serve first and foremost the interests of the United States. This is where sectarianism became institutionalized and politicized to unprecedented measures. The first step that the U.S made was to create an Interim governing council founded on the basis of ethnic and religious divisions (Ismael & fuller, 2008). Another



significant tactic was to replace the Iraqi constitution with a pro-American document that lacked any nationalistic content. Article 113 through 121 of the new constitution promoted the merging of regions, specifically those that were rich in oil and gas and therefore would benefit the U.S, into mega-states by conferring constitutional autonomy to those new merges (Ismael & Fuller, 2008). Furthermore, under the guise of waging a counterinsurgency war, sectarian militia forces were formed from Shiite and Kurdish groups and unleashed particularly following the inauguration of the Shiite dominated al Ja'fari government in 2005. Those paramilitary forces were formed of special commandos and public order brigades and would later be involved in sectarian slaughter resulting in at least five million refugees (Ismael & Fuller, 2008).

The rise of the Kurdish Peshmerga militia as the only autonomous armed forces was extremely relevant in promoting autonomy in the Kurdish region. Those Kurdish forces that had been previously fighting as part of the Iraqi army were to be reintegrated within the Kurdish resistance movement once the Iraqi army was disbanded in 2003 (Lamani & Momani, 2010). With the Peshmerga now playing a central role in the political reconstruction of Baghdad in the post-Saddam era, the Kurdish authorities were simultaneously increasing their influence in the Kurdish outskirts. In 2005, Barzani rose to power as the new president of the Kurdistan region at the time when Talabani became the president of Iraq (Lamani & Momani, 2010). The Peshmerga were turned into regular forces and not "militia" securing the borders of the Kurdish region and ensuring the Kurdish region remains independent from the instability in Baghdad (Lamani & Momani, 2010).

Rather than creating a pluralistic Iraq, the elections of 2005 created deep divisions. Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties, all created coalitions based on sectarian differences giving sub-national identities political relevance (Yamao, 2012). The problem was not due to the incompatibility of

Iraqi society with democracy but the introduction of democratic politics in the absence of strong civil society, the weakness of the state prior to and during the democratic attempts, and the sudden imbalance in power between Sunnis and Shiites, led to ethnic strife as sectarian identity was given supremacy (Younis, 2011).

It is worth noting that the purpose of the ‘de-Bathification’ process was not to eradicate a tyrannical regime but rather to erase the borders of Iraq as a once imagined community into a disintegrated society with no national unity tying sects together. Within this ideational vacuum, Iraqis would revert back to tribal and communal solidarities in the absence of a nationalist ideology (Haddad, 2013). Amidst this disintegration, militant groups took advantage of sectarian divisions to establish their rule and this forced the U.S and its allies to reconsider their position in relation to Iraq. This was no longer a classic case of national resistance but it was now an issue of security for the United States, as Iraq was turned into an extremely fertile soil for terrorism to flourish.

### **The rise of ISIS: from national resistance to jihad**

It is important to note that the rise of fundamentalism did not come as a sudden bad surprise for the Bush administration. Classified reports prepared by the National Intelligence Council had long predicted that the invasion of Iraq would result in the rise of Political Islam in the region but this was something that the Bush administration had completely turned a blind eye to, because the war was going to happen for better or worse (Taras, 2006). The marginalization of Sunnis made the rise of fundamentalist groups an inescapable reality. The hundreds of military-trained men who were left unemployed and excluded from the political realm for their association with Ba’athism, began to organize resistance cells against western invaders and Political Islam provided them with the rhetoric for resistance (Taras, 2006).

It was in this environment that Abu-Mus'ab al Zarqawi and Al-Qaida penetrated Mosul and northern Iraq (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016). The choice of Zarqawi as the appointed leader of Jihad in Iraq was a very strategic decision made by Al-Qaida because he was the man capable to achieve the long awaited dream of establishing a caliphate in the region. He was able to flee from Tora Bora into Pakistan on foot and was able to recruit suicide bombers all across Europe, and in deed, Zarqawi started with less than 500 men in Iraq but was able to recruit five thousand Iraqi fighters following the U.S invasion (Gerges, 2016). It is worth stressing that Iraq before 2003 has never experienced jihadist insurgency in the same way that other Arab states like Egypt and Algeria have. Saddam's increased piety during the 1990s was more of a façade used to legitimize his rule amidst a failing state in the sanctions era, but he was clearly a strict nationalist which is why it was much more difficult for Al-Qaida to penetrate Iraqi society prior to 2003 (Gerges, 2016). For that reason, Zarqawi and his followers were at first not welcomed by other resistance groups in Iraq.

In time, young Iraqis who were previously concerned with national resistance were now being recruited by organized groups with radical ideologies. Detainees who were being released from prison and had suffered from American abuse such as that of Abu-Gharib were becoming more purposeful and more savage in their resistance. Resistance was now a holy war which was made viable through Al-Qaida extensive networks and resources allowing for more deliberate and sophisticated operations (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016).

Zarqawi's plan in Iraq was to tear the country apart by exacerbating sectarian tension; this was done by attacking the Shiite community to actively provoke an extreme response from Shiite militia that would in turn incite Sunni fears of an existential Shiite threat. This was achieved through the mass bombing of the tomb of Imam's Ali Al-Hadi and Hasan Al-Askari in Samarra in

2006. This atrocity ignited street violence between Shiites and Sunnis leading to a “civil war” that lasted until the US forces intervened by deploying 30,000 additional troops to Iraq to end this war between February 2007 and 2008 (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016). As part of the plan to purify Iraq from the infidels, Yezidis also became a target for Al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was reported that in 2008 there were no Yezidis left in Mosul because they had to make a choice to either convert or to die. Earlier in 2006 Al-Qaeda militants attacked a bus carrying 23 Yezidi men and executed them instantly (Lamani & Momani, 2010). A year later another Al-Qaeda affiliated group conducted the single most devastating attack since the war on Iraq, by targeting a Yezidi community in Sinjar, killing 796 people and leaving over 1500 wounded (Whiteside, 2015).

Before Al-Zarqawi died in an American airstrike in 2006, he passed his mantle to one of his disciples, Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi, who changed the name of the organization from Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) to the Islamic state of Iraq (ISI) (Gerges, 2016). His reign however, was short-lived. In 2010, Abu Umar al-Boghdadi, and his deputy Abu Ayyub Al-Masri were both killed in an operation led by the American and Iraqi forces. The killing of the two most senior commanders in a single incident created a major challenge to the survival of ISI (Gerges, 2016). A new leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was appointed to lead the organization after the death of Baghdadi the first. At that time, ISI continued to carry out terrorist attacks and kidnappings in an attempt to reinvigorate its presence. As Fawaz Gerges contends, the revival of the group seemed like a far-fetched reality but the changes that took place in the region as well as the increasing grip on power by the government of Maliki changed the scene entirely (Gerges, 2016).

To any observer, the civil war of 2006-2007 serve as clear evidence to validate theories of primordial hatred in Iraq and the inability of coexistence under one state. Although, the civil war clearly created new models of reference for sectarian relations, yet the civil war was neither

representative of sectarian relations in Iraqi society, nor was it an aberration or an exception. Consequently, it is also neither irreversible nor unrepeatable (Haddad, 2013). An honest attempt to examine the civil war would inevitably lead to a great deal of ambiguity, this ambiguity is inherent to any form of group identity as modes of self-definition are constantly changing and fluctuating (Haddad, 2013). The years following the civil war reveal a shift where Iraqis themselves started to reject identity politics. The bombing of Samarra and the rising death toll during those years of civil strife have in fact created a negative disposition towards sectarianism and prompted anti-sectarian and anti-federalist sentiments to rise as Iraqis feared the dissolution of the state (Haddad, 2013). In the 2009 elections, 79 percent of voters expressed that reconciliation was needed (Yamao, 2012). By 2010 there were actually no hopes for ISIS to succeed as Sunni Arab tribes formed a coalition which became known as the Sahwa, the Sunni Awakening councils were now siding with American troops to help end the threat posed by ISI (Gerges, 2016). This alignment of Sunnis with the Americans provided a golden opportunity for the government to reunite sects who were all facing the same enemy. The government's failure to acknowledge the demands of the Awakening councils and the continued marginalization of Sunnis resulted in the reorganization of Sunni extremist groups against the government, reviving ISI to gain greater control with thousands of supporters (Gerges, 2016).

### **The Arab Revolutions of 2011**

The brutal response of the Syrian state during the popular uprising in 2011 was significantly instrumental in the revival of ISIS. The rampant chaos in Syria in particular provided a golden opportunity to revive ISIS as the group would now cross borders to join Syrian resistance where there were now new recruits and joining of forces in a war zone where looting of weapons was made easy (Gerges, 2016).

However, the uprising in Syria alone would not have caused the reinvigoration of ISIS in Iraq had the Sunni tribes continued in the same position in their resistance to ISIS. Several internal factors have caused deterioration in the relationship between the government and the Sunni population contributing to the alignment of many Sunnis with ISIS against the Shi' led government (Gerges, 2016). Of all the factors fueling the insurgence of ISIS, the failure of the coalition forces and the government to rebuild the country on the foundations of an inclusive national project is by far the most crucial. Malki's government turned to be a replication of Saddam's authoritarianism and corruption; furthering political factionalism (Gerges, 2016). He monopolized power by surrounding himself with submissive loyalists and filled security forces with political appointees who have weakened the structure of the military making it easier for ISIS to penetrate. As a counter force to the Sunni Sahwa council, Maliki created a parallel Shi'ia militia because he was extremely fearful of the presence of a large Sunni armed militia with a strong popular base and receiving endless support from the United States (Gerges, 2016). Once the U.S troops withdrew from Iraq, the Sahwa who were promised integration into the Iraqi army for their prominent success in fighting ISIS, ended up being arrested and accused of having ties to Ba'athists and jihadists (Gerges, 2016). Even local Sunnis who were integrated with state institutions were given low-paid and low-ranking jobs in comparison to Shi'is. This meant that Sunni Iraqis were now facing opposition from both ISIS and the Shiite led government (Gerges, 2016).

By 2011, Iraqi citizens were all suffering from the government's authoritarianism, lack of services and the increasing corruption and cronyism. The government had failed at fulfilling any promises, even the reconciliation initiative that was launched by the government to fight sectarianism, and revise the 'de-Bathification' program failed (Gerges, 2016). Thus, when the Arab uprisings took place, thousands of Iraqis mobilized themselves to express their discontent

with the government (Gerges, 2016). The government repression grew, banning media coverage of the protests and their determination to end the protests were to be achieved through violence and human rights abuses, Protesters began to call for Maliki's resignation and as the situation worsened a plethora of armed groups were formed. During this time ISIS had already started to form coalition with Sunni tribes in rural areas and they were able to attract many high ranking former Baath officials who found a new mode of resistance through jihadism (Gerges, 2016).

As protests in Syria escalated during 2011-2013 turning Syria into a war zone, ISIS would benefit from the Syrian chaos by recruiting plenty of supporters many of them coming from Iraq to broaden its influence. The chaos in Syria was extremely strategic because it gave the organization depths and maneuverability, which was essential in creating a strong base for the expansion of the caliphate. Maliki's support for Bashar Al Asad's regime was the final trigger in strengthening hostility, turning the protests into a sectarian clash between Sunnis and Shi'ites. ISIS took advantage of this launching the "Breaking the Walls" operation, a yearlong campaign carrying a sectarian overtone. The operation ended in July, 2013 with the triumphant breaching of the Abu-Gharib prison causing the escape of at least 500 or more prisoners the majority of which were detained for carrying out terrorist attacks (Gerges, 2016).

### **The Genocidal Ideology of ISIS**

The ideology of ISIS as a movement was wholly shaped by Musab Al-Zarqawi who adopted the Qutbian requirement of Sharia law as the basis of government. Accordingly, secularism and democracy are antithetical to this ideology (Gerges, 2016). Zarqawi believed in Jihad against local apostate governments and the purification of the caliphate from non-believers who don't follow the Sunna (Whiteside, 2015). This approach was a clear drift from Bin Laden's

who believed in uniting Muslims against the distant enemy, namely the United States. For Zarqawi the fight was internal and had to start by cleansing the Umma from within (Gerges, 2016).

The organization is rooted in the politics of sectarianism, as a group it feeds on the Sunni-Shi'i divide between the Sunni Arab world and its rival Iran (Gerges, 2016). For Zarqawi and his successors, the Shia had long been a fifth column deviating from true Islam and their worship of deceased Imams was against Islamic belief in one God. Their support for the infidel Americans in the war on Iraq, and their rise to power which came at the expense of Sunnis, was the main justification of why they had to be targeted (Whiteside, 2015). The Yezidis stood in an even more despised position, although they did not hold any power at the state level but being labelled as devil-worshippers meant that their elimination from the caliphate was unquestionable. Three main works have influenced the rhetoric of ISIS justifying their acts, the most famous of which is *The Management of Slavery* which strategizes a roadmap for the creation of the caliphate. The second book is *The Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Jihad*, which calls for Jihadists to do what it takes to establish a purified caliphate. The third book is *The Essentials of Making Ready (for Jihad)* which focuses on theological and practical aspects of Jihad and has acted as a manual for Jihadis in the training camps (Gerges, 2016).

To handle the number of enslaved girls and the growing market, ISIS created a special department to manage the spoils of war (Gerges, 2016). Systematic rape has become an effective tool to recruit men from conservative Islamic societies where casual sex is forbidden (Gerges, 2016). Fighters had both the choice to take those women as their legal wives and gain an even greater reward of creating families from heretic Yezidi women or they were to take these women as a source of immediate satisfaction in return for the military activities. Laws related to the treatment of prisoners and slaves during the time of the prophet were to be implemented



legitimizing the rape of Yazidis (Gerges, 2016). Once captured, the state was to receive one fifth of those women as the spoils of war that must go to the Islamic state and the rest of the women and children were to be divided between militants who participated in the operations (Gerges, 2016).

### **Sex, war and Islam**

It could well be argued that the most horrendous of all crimes committed by ISIS pertain to the slavery of Yazidi women. Thousands of news stories have time and again reported on Yazidi females who were sold in “Souk al-Sabaya” reviving the political memory of the historical Abbasids where the “Jariya” system was very central to the caliphate. The Abbasid Empire is recognized by scholars of Muslim women’s history as the period of “Jawary”, characterized by the capture and enslavement of women during Muslim conquests (Seedat, 2016). This political memory is important for ISIS’ war propaganda, because it gives the organization a reputation comparable to that of the Abbasid Empire which serves in reviving the dream of glorious caliphate. On the other side, it has given a representation of Islam as a sensual, carnal religion that feeds on both sex and violence. Is it Islam to blame or is it the doctrine of ISIS or is this just the rhetoric of war in a gendered world? Sexual violence towards women is certainly not a new phenomenon; it is rather as ancient as the practice of war but the sexual aspect of the Islamic State does present a unique case that should be examined on its own.

Statistics on sexual violence in conflict zones point to large numbers ranging from fifty thousand reported rapes in Bosnia in the early 1990s, between a hundred thousand and a million German women raped at the end of the Second World War by Soviet Soldiers, a quarter of a million sexual assaults in the wars of Sierra Leone in the 1990s, and half a million rapes in the Rwandan genocide (Heineman, 2011). The relationship between sex and violence is even more ancient than

all these relatively modern conflicts. Physical violence against women was very common in Greek and Roman warfare narratives; it was apt to occur on the night of capturing a city and involved slavery or rape. Ancient Greek and Byzantine Greek narratives often use the term “andrapodized” (andrapodizein, andrapodizesthai) as part of ancient warfare. This verb refers to the turning of war captives into slaves or subjugates (andrapoda) (Heineman, 2011). It stands to reason that subordinating captured women was crucial to the origins of Western warfare. The domination of people was a first step toward extracting the benefits and natural resources from a captured land (Heineman, 2011).

In the most basic sense, sex is just part of the economy of war. War requires men to fight and these men require a steady supply of sex, in the same way that arms or food are needed. As one American General, George Patton said of his troops: “if they don’t fuck, they don’t fight” (Seedat, 2016). The concept of sexual economy is best illustrated in the case of the Japanese comfort system. “Comfort women” were used to provide sex for soldiers in Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and other areas conquered during the Second World War (Tanaka, 2001). This system was first set up as a response to the atrocities of mass rape committed by Japanese soldiers to local citizens, but as the war extended, military leaders believed that the provision of comfort women was a good way to compensate their soldiers. By 1938, the system became well interlocked with the Japanese military system (Tanaka, 2001). Similarly, the, “blue lamp” which was the code word for British brothels formed part of British strategy during World War I. During World War II 30,000 women are estimated to have been forced into sex slavery in Nazi occupied Eastern Europe to provide sexual services to the army. A much more recent example that is many ways similar to that of ISIS is the supply of girls and young women from Chibok to the Boko Haram fighters (Seedat, 2016).

What makes the case of the Islamic State unique is that ISIS believes in a God-given doctrine that in their worldview legitimizes and even encourages forms of sexual slavery. This point is of great significance because it shows how violence may be tolerated to the extent it carries a rational, utilitarian functionalist justification. In the case of ISIS, our sensibilities are more disturbed by it being justified not as a necessary evil but by divine right in comparison to other acts of mass murder like Truman's annihilation of Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki which was justified as retribution.

In the worldview of ISIS, sexual slavery is necessary to purify the caliphate, and is also a reward for those who are involved in Jihad. The fourth issue of the ISIS newsletter Dabiq produced in the month of Dhul Hijja 1435 (CE 26 September -24 October 2014) explains the legalities of enslavement through a direct link between enslaving Yazidi women and the nearing of the end of times. The abandonment of slavery is seen to have occasioned various forms of immorality and its revival signals the coming of the hour (Seedat, 2016).

Another article in published in Dabiq in 2014 explains that:

“...a number of contemporary scholars have mentioned that the desertion of slavery had led to an increase in fāhishah (adultery, fornication, etc.), because the shar’ī alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation towards sin. In addition, many Muslim families who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the fitnah of prohibited khalwah (seclusion) and resultant zinā [adultery] occurring between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal. This again is from the consequences of abandoning jihād and chasing after the dunyā (world), wallāhul-musta’ān (and in God we seek help). May Allah bless this Islamic State with the revival of further aspects of the religion occurring at its hands.” (As cited in Seedat, 2016)

There is much contention surrounding the texts and interpretations from which the self-claimed Islamic State draws its ideologies, but in the worldview of ISIS these sexual practices are legitimized by texts that support the institution of concubinage.

“O Prophet, indeed We have made lawful to you your wives...those your right hand possesses from what Allah has returned to you [of captives] ...and a believing woman if she gives herself to the Prophet [and] if the Prophet wishes to marry her, [this is] only for you, excluding the [other] believers... You, [O Muhammad], may put aside whom you will of them or take to yourself whom you will. And any that you desire of those [wives] from whom you had [temporarily] separated - there is no blame upon you [in returning her]. “(Surah Al-Ahzab 33:50-53)

Surah Al-Muminun (23:6) and Surah Al-Maarij (70:30) both, highlight a distinction between spouses and "those whom one's right hands possess" (female slaves), saying "أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ". ISIS also finds legal grounding to legitimize its practices in the institution of “term” or “temporary marriage” which aims at providing immediate erotic fulfilment without marital obligations (Dialmy, 2010). According to some hadiths as quoted in Sexuality and Islam (2010), “... social order [...] requires male control of women’s bodies and sexuality. Female sexuality, if uncontrolled, could lead to social chaos” (Dialmy, 2010). Other significant texts that provide theological support for ISIS are referenced in Aš-Šāfi’ (2006) and Bouhdiba (2012).

It is also worth mentioning that ISIS draws from a socio-political legacy where sexual violence was notoriously used by the Iraqi secret police against citizens. Gender inequality became even more vivid during the sanctions era following the Gulf war, when the regime turned to tribal values to gain dominance and accordingly polygamy and honor killing were revived. In 2000, the regime publicly hanged many Iraqi women accused of prostitution for defaming Iraq’s honor (Ahram, 2015). With the collapse of the state, sex trafficking of Iraqi women increased, according to NGO estimates, in the years 2003–06, between 2,000 and 3,500 Iraqi women disappeared, and many were trafficked. Honor killing was widely used creating further divisions between communities an example of that was in the stoning to death of a 17-year-old Yazidi who was in a relationship with a Sunni; the stoning was videotaped and posted on the internet as a threat against mixed marriage (Ahram, 2015).

Under the U.S control of Iraq, sexual violence became instrumental in torturing suspected terrorists such as the famous incident of the Abu-Gharib prison. It is interesting to note that many of the ISIS militants were themselves once subject or witnesses of sexual violence at the hands of the American army. At least nine of ISIS leaders including the commander Baghdadi were themselves held captive in Camp Bucca (Ahram, 2015). In this sense, the Islamic state draws from a socio-political legacy of patriarchal and tyrannical state forces that have often employed sexual violence towards citizens and a theological worldview that idolizes sexual pleasure and demeans the other. The sexual slavery of Yezidis is thus a byproduct of many factors that in many ways make ISIS a unique case.

### **A case for Genocide**

Although ISIS has destroyed the social fabric of Iraqi society as a whole by targeting all minority groups; Christian, Shiites, Kurds and at times Sunnis, and all minorities have suffered great losses, the Yezidi population is by far the most vivid case subject to ISIS genocidal efforts because of their beliefs (Whiteside, 2015). In this sense, establishing the caliphate meant that it had to be purified from all non-believers. The atrocities committed against Yezidis, be it that of cultural cleansing, or the abduction of thousands of women and children and the resulting large-scale displacement are all evidence of acts of genocide that place Yezidis in danger of extinction (Lamani & Momani, 2010).

Most of the criteria of Genocide be it; “an overt justification for genocide, the capacity of armed groups to conduct it, political motivations for genocide, genocidal acts and mass killings, evidence of the intent to destroy, and possible events that might trigger plans for the full resourcing of a genocide campaign (United Nations, 1948), are met through the crimes committed against

Yezidis. The only criterion that provides a challenge is the state dimension which is characteristic of Genocide acts.

However, it can well be argued that with many territories and institutions under its rule, the Islamic state, though it is not recognized or bound by norms based expectations, currently plays the same role as that of the state. This involves implementing Sharia law, taxes, and control of health, education, culture, electricity and oil revenues. The Islamic state both mimics and competes with the state. Physical and sexual violence are utilized to ensure its reign as a replacement of the previous infidel states, simultaneously ISIS mimics the state's coercive measures that were once used against citizens and Islamic militants. In light of this, it is significant to take into consideration that in the age of globalization and the weakening of the state, new forms of state like actors have appeared that deserves the reconsideration of the state criterion in the Genocide convention. The advent of the Islamic State suggests that the convention should not be restrictively applied to the nation-state in the traditional sense but should include new forms of 'state-like actors' (Whiteside, 2015). It is worth noting that the term genocide evolved as a consequence of certain events that took place even before the term came into existence but it was bound by a specific context in which the state had the right to use force, likewise, the new context that globalization has offered signifies that new structures can be included in determining what a state is even if this was not included in Lemkin's definition. In this sense, Weber's (1919) definition of what a state is; an entity that maintains monopoly to legitimately use force in a certain geographic area, evidently applies to ISIS.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

#### **Narrative Theory**

Over the last few decades, researchers have shown an increasing interest in individuals and group narratives which became known as the narrative turn (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Utilizing narrative was certainly not a new concept but what was new in the past few decades, was the institutionalization of narrative emerging as an autonomous object of inquiry. Some scholars have precisely identified three narrative turns. The first is within literary studies, in the 1960s signifying

a structuralist, scientific and descriptive rhetoric to the study of narrative. In historiography, the turn to narrative theory indicated criticism of naive master narratives as presented by White in 1993. In the social sciences this began, in the early 1980s and took a general anti-positivist and often humanist approach to the study of human psychology and culture (Goodson, 2009). Accordingly, this narrative turn challenged the positivist approach in its examination of the social world and the fact that it places the social researcher outside the social reality, independent from the context which they are a part of.

This narrative turn is in many ways is a product of postmodernism; emerging in the context of a new wave of philosophical discussion about the relationship between the self and the social world. Lyotard's rejection of grand narratives and the tendency to consider alternative, small, forgotten, and untold stories, which was first taken over in feminist studies gave way to a new discourse viewing "life as narrative" (Hyvärinen, 2007). The move from modernist master narratives to the postmodern multiple disrupted notions of subjectivity was accompanied by a focus on Life history and narrative as a methodology (Goodson, 2009).

Central to this postmodernist discussion was a reexamination of the self and the individual as a social actor; personal narratives therefore provided an opposing paradigm by providing knowledge from the inside out and accordingly bridging the gap between the individual and the social world. (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 2008) The main theories of Social Sciences formerly used, have left a legacy of viewing the individual through categories be it race, gender or social class placing them outside the social world and consequently social actors are treated as if they have no individual history. Modern western notions of the self that have been constructed through enlightenment discourses have portrayed a bold universal human subject. This European hegemonic western "Self" became subject to much criticism by different voices; Feminist,



Foucauldian and third-world voices that began to propose new notions of the self, separate from that produced by the enlightenment project ( Maynes, Pierce& Laslett, 2008)

The functional properties of narratives are fundamental to this research. As McAdams (1995) argues, identity is in itself an evolving inner story of the self. Human beings “...create identity in their lives to the extent that the self can be told in a coherent, followable, and vivifying narrative that integrates the person into society in a productive and generative way and provides the person with a purposeful self-history that explains how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the anticipated self of tomorrow... (McAdams, 1995)”. This becomes even more significant in the case of refugees who have suffered losses and disruptions creating tangible discontinuity in their understanding of their self and their surroundings (Mahmoud, 2009). Accordingly, narrative is not only a methodology of this research but the very tool through which the interlocutors make sense of their world. The process of story-telling for refugees becomes a coping mechanism through which they can comprehend and articulate their lives (Mahmoud, 2009).

## **Interviews**

The accounts of each of the woman are an accumulation of several interviews. Most of the interviews were free-flowing, open-ended and depended on the situation and flow of the conversation, but in every interview I included a question on how the interlocutor survived the siege of Sinjar. The narratives were written after meeting the woman or when I had a chance to be alone and record some insights because I usually did not return from the camp until very late in the evening. In some cases when specific details were provided such as in the account of Sabah who provided details of being taken to different places between Syria and Iraq, I had to immediately write those details. It must say that all the Yezidis I met were extremely approachable,

welcoming and hospitable to strangers but they were all afraid. They refused to sign any consent form that acknowledges their approval to participate and they also refused to have their interviews recorded. It was a significant period of mistrust for the entire community, they were afraid of forged stories being written about them, and many of their family members were still in captivity so they were cautious not to reveal information that could harm them.

Hayat was the only interlocutor who did not mind being recorded and videotaped but after the first interview I realized that being recorded was a barrier inhibiting the flow of emotions and authenticity of expression so I had to rely on recording personal notes and observations. Although the majority of Yezidis refused to have their interviews recorded or videotaped, in some cases, as soon as the recording started respondents felt an obligation to preach about injustice or petition their case rather than narrate their personal stories and for that reason recording was not always the most reliable tool.

It also must be noted that the narratives included in the chapter are translated from the original conversations I had with the women, which were either in Arabic and translated to English or were in Krumanji, translated to Arabic and then to English. In some conversations there had to be an interpreter which meant that all the information had to pass through several filters; first the interlocutor, second the interpreter, third is the researcher who also has to translate information into English for this research. All direct quotes are translated word for word but most of the stories are paraphrased and as a result of that some of the language may sound unusual to English speakers. It should also be noted that the names used in this research are pseudonyms as all the ladies preferred to conceal their identity.

## **Ethnography**

Ethnographic fieldwork mostly included observations of Yazidi refugees in their everyday lives inside the camps or in cafes, transportation, homes and work-settings. Ethnographic work also included meeting with different people who worked with refugees mainly social workers in NGOs most of them were Europeans and Americans but also some were Egyptians and Iraqis. I was also very intentional in interviewing Christian refugees in the village of Bikhety as well as those of Camp Shariah to give a holistic picture of how their experience of ISIS can be compared to that of Yazidis. I also made use of the time I spent with Kurds be it in Erbil or in Dohuk to examine how the local population perceive the situation and how they view Yazidis as a minority group. These accounts were not necessarily included in the research but were essential in giving a multidimensional, holistic approach to the issue.

### **Data Analysis**

The narratives provided by the women as well as all the other interviews were analyzed thematically. Coding the data involved organizing the raw data into conceptual categories and creating themes. After identifying the major themes, I selectively chose data that would illustrate certain themes making further connections and comparisons. Accordingly, this research conveys a certain picture of these women at a particular point in time and place and therefore offers some truths but it does not offer “the truth” about these women.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Introducing the Women**

Most news coverage has often reduced Yezidis, to a fixed stereotype of “the slave girl”. This reductionist view has in many ways dehumanized and commodified those women in much the same way that their perpetrators did because it neglects the diversity, history, dreams and ambitions that each of these women carries. This generalization is true for other Genocides as well. Hunt (2004) in “*Muslim Women in the Bosnian Crucible*”, argues that while many think of Bosnian women as victims, by focusing particularly on the systemic rape of thousands of them during the war; the interviews conducted in her research shows that those women are essentially different, energetic and are full of determination to restore their country.

The uniqueness of each experience that these women lived begs us to dig deeper and examine the diversity of what it is to be a Yezidi woman, beyond fixed categories of ethnicity, religion, gender and refugee. As will be shown throughout the narratives, the process of identity formation be it; ethnic, religious or gender are not culturally prescribed in a static, identical manner, instead they are internalized inconsistently and divergently that even within families individuals internalize versions of their culture differently (Gregg, 2007). As highlighted in the chapter on methodology, the fact that identity is an inner evolving story means that the individual is actively integrating the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the anticipated future to provide a life with unity, purpose, and meaning (McAdams, 1995). Through this process of forming an inner story the individual may highlight various chapters of this story and conceal others depending on what provides them with meaning and unity at the time of narration.

This chapter introduces each woman in the chronology in which I met them. It is important to note that while I met many other Yezidi women, the reason why I included these five in my research, is due to two main reasons. The first and the most obvious is that these women all showed willingness to participate. For some Yezidi women it was not really a question of willingness but of the ability to speak. Many of these who have survived traumatic experiences were really unable to recall their memories and if they did the trauma was extremely overwhelming that the interview had to be stopped. The second reason is purely a practical one and that is most of the Yezidis I met specially women did not speak Arabic. I was lucky that three of the women, Sahar, Hayat and Anhar spoke Arabic. Gulee and Sabah did not speak Arabic. When I first met Gulee, she made it clear that she does not speak Arabic but the rest of the conversation was actually all in Arabic. She was not fluent but it was good enough. In the case of Sabah, Anhar was the one doing the

interpretation and it had to be so because if it wasn't for Anhar, Sabah would have never trusted me or accepted to give any piece of information.

I start with Hayat because she was the first I met and she also was the entry point to Sahar and Gulee. These three women all live in the same camp and their lives are interconnected in varying ways. Hayat is Sahar's aunt and they both work in the same NGO which Hayat heads. Sahar is one of the key people working in the team. Gulee is not related to the ladies but she attends the Arabic classes which the NGO offers to help Yezidi girls adapt to their new surroundings. I was introduced to Anhar and Sabah in a completely different setting. I knew Anhar first through a common friend; I had no intention to include her in my research at first because she was only helping me connect with Yezidi survivors given that she works in an NGO that serves survivors. As our friendship grew and I got to know her story I felt a need to include her in this research. Sabah is a client in Anhar's NGO but as time went by their relationship developed and they have become friends.

## **Hayat**

Hayat Ibrahim Murad was more like an iconic symbol of resistance. Her two brothers had passed away as "martyrs" in the civil war of 2007 and from thereon Hayat became the backbone of her family. Hayat heads an NGO funded by a Lutheran foundation which aims at helping women and children in the Be'adra camp. This camp hosts middle-upper class Yezidis mainly from Sinjar as well as others from Mosul. After the siege and the days, she spent in the mountain; she decided to give her life to empowering women in her community. She also provides a lot of services for children and the elderly population.

Hayat acts as a facilitator between the world outside the camp and the world inside. She was the contact person and the entry point to the camp whenever doctors or social workers wanted to offer their help. Having previously worked as a nurse in Sinjar, she was particularly interested in tackling health related issues of the community and this also became her source of triumph when ISIS attacked, because she was there to help the injured. What struck me the most about Hayat was her openness and her willingness to cooperate with strangers; she seized every opportunity as a chance to petition the Yezidi case before the whole world.

This new life in the camp was nothing like the old, the majority of Yezidis lived in green fields in agriculture societies but they were now confined to a refugee camp in an unfamiliar environment. The only way they maintained a sense of familiarity was by connecting to one another. That is why Hayat's project was significant in bringing those women together and providing a channel through which they can preserve their community in the midst of this new and unfamiliar setting.

*I refuse to be a prey but I insist on fighting the enemy, I may not have guns or weapons but I have my voice to speak. This project started a year ago and it was funded by the Lutheran foundation to help women and survivors. My project includes many activities and different trainings in various skills like poetry, sewing, singing and a lot of other things. I try to give those girls hope, I previously had 13 survivors who came in a devastating state, but they are all doing very well and are now working with NGOs. They want to tell the world that they are not victims. I walked this journey with them from the very beginning. I gave them the love and care they needed when they have no one to take care of them. I scheduled therapy sessions for all those girls and I began by telling them that they are not alone and that I have been in their shoes and gone through the same circumstances so that they would*

*feel relaxed and not shameful about their rape experience. Many of them have moved on and are now working and helping other girls, but they still come to visit and they are all doing well and not a single one of them decided to leave Iraq. God gave us this life to live and we must insist on living.*

Hayat was also responsible for creating activities and events for young children. Most of those children have been severely traumatized from the days they spent in the harsh mountain conditions. A lot of them have lost their ability to speak and became disengaged; it was through music, art and dancing activities that she would help those children recover. Hayat had no family of her own but she considered herself responsible for the entire Yezidi community and particularly those young children.

*All my life, I did not do anything for myself but I live for my family and community and that's why I respect and collaborate with all who want to help Yezidis. We Yezidis are simple people we have no hatred, we love people from all religions we love God, we worship God and we follow the commands he says in all religions.*

Hayat's speech is supportive of how Yezidis over time developed an accommodative strategy when dealing with the other as an attempt to highlight commonalities and conceal differences in belief as suggested in much of the literature on Yezidis (Nicolaus, 2011). This was also evident in how Hayat made it a point to explain that the name of camp Be'adra is closely related to the word "virgin" which is used to refer to Virgin Mary, when she knew that I was Christian.

Aside from helping other women and her dedication to the betterment of the community, Hayat's project was important in helping her acquire a new identity of the empowered Yezidi



woman. As McAdams (1995) notes, Human beings create their identities to the extent that the self can be told in a coherent narrative that integrates the person into society in a productive way and provides the individual with a self-history that explains how the self of yesterday became the self of today (McAdams, 1995). This project was significant for Hayat in that it allowed her create a narrative of her own identity as a strong Yezidi woman. To maintain coherence of this new identity, she had to reject other narratives that did not comply. This is why Hayat did not allow herself to be weak or to express emotion because it was inconsistent with the narrative she tried to project of the strong woman in the midst of chaos. Her choice, be it conscious or unconscious was to numb her feelings altogether saying that “at times suffering is too great that you no longer feel.” Every account Hayat gave be it of the siege or her injured sister-in-law or her father’s death was followed by “I had to be strong” and being strong to her meant to no longer allow any penetration to her emotions be it pain or joy.

## **Sahar**

Sahar is Hayat’s niece and though she was only 16 at the time I met her, she was a key employee in Nadia’s NGO and was particularly responsible for running the beauty salon. From her outer appearance, this young girl looked like a typical westernized teenager. She was a peasant girl but had nothing to do with the stereotypical image of a Yezidi peasant girl. Sahar looked very composed and finely dressed on the outside but once she was left alone her sorrows surfaced, leaving her in a pool of emotions that were just difficult to gather and confine. Sahar’s father died almost ten years ago, and since then she’s been living with her mother and two brothers. Her older brother had left to Germany and she is currently living with her mother and younger brother in camp Be’adra. The absence of a male figure particularly her father was a constant aching wound for Sahar. Her cousin is severely traumatized and can barely speak; I was told that since the attacks

he started experiencing fear and anxiety to the extent of wetting his bed at night. Her other brother is too young to take care of the family. Sahar felt that there was nothing more painful in life than the loss of her father and had he been alive nothing would have happened to them.

*My father died in a Sunni Yezidi clash in 2007, he died as a martyr because he was trying to protect our people. We Yezidis are used to suffering; we have been through a lot of persecution in our history but there is nothing like what is happening now. The situation of Yezidis is much worse than any other time, at least in the past we were living alone in our land but now we are dispersed everywhere.*

I was keen to know what Sahar plans for her future. She had missed several years of schooling since the events and decided not to join the camp's school. She was not interested in education and was not confident that she could make-up the years she had missed from school but she loved to make people beautiful and this is what she wanted to do in life.

*I'm responsible for running this Salon because Hayat is not here most of the time and I love it. I love making those girls beautiful. Those Daesh guys want us because we are beautiful, it is not about religion or anything but they say Yezidi girls are too beautiful to be left alone. The result is most of those girls returning from ISIS are in self-hatred they try to take their own lives because they feel so filthy and unworthy".*

Sahar's narrative shows a different perspective to the war project, one that is not ideological but instrumental and in a sense self-celebratory. Sahar's explanation of why Yezidis were targeted is simply based on the fact that Yezidis are celebrated for their physical appearance and the basic war economy that men need sex to be able to fight.

*Marian: How do you feel being here in the Camp?*

*Sahar: It was very difficult in the beginning. For days I couldn't sleep and didn't know if what we went through was real or not. I did not know why life is so difficult, why all this would happen to us and to my mother, it is a terrible feeling not knowing if you will see some people again or not.... But Hamdellah, Hamdellah*

*Marian: Do you feel the situation is a bit better compared to what it was when you first came?"*

*Sahar: It is both easier and harder...easier because we got used to it and we are not in the same shock but harder, much harder when this becomes your life and nothing is changing. Life was already difficult, now it is the same challenges plus all that we have to go through."*

The grief she carried over the loss of her father, which was intensified after the events left her feeling depressed and alone even though she was popular and she was doing a great job in the Salon. Sahar was focused on doing things that would engage her and give her a sense of gratification and she found that in beautifying girls. She was so determined to make those girls look and feel beautiful even if it was a temporary moment of relief. For Sahar, the best survival mechanism on the emotional level was to keep herself distracted from her thoughts and emotions. She had to keep herself busy for as long as she could. I often wondered why Sahar took her job so seriously to the extent of overworking herself. The reason behind her strong commitment was revealed by her mother during a visit to their shelter. The first weeks of their settlement in the camp were very difficult for Sahar to the extent that she stopped eating and drinking and was always crying and withdrawn, if it wasn't for Hayat's intervention Sahar would have died in misery.

What was obvious from observing Sahar and the answers she gave was her depressive tendency. Unlike her aunt, Sahar was extremely emotional. She was too absorbed in her sorrows in a way that made her feel extremely hopeless and helpless. Sahar's strategy in dealing with her emotions was to keep herself distracted. Her emotions were strong, frequent and overtly displayed and in fear of sinking in her emotions, just like the months following her return she had to distract by keeping herself busy. Even her investment in dressing well was rather a way of diverting her focus from her inner-state to her outer appearance and it was about presenting a different image through her physique than the image she had of her inner-self. Just by going to the Salon and engaging with the women she started feeling better and her mood improved significantly. It is also worth noting that her work in the beauty-salon helped alleviate her depression because she saw the rewards of it. She began to appreciate her own talents, though she previously despised her abilities and seeing that she was impactful enough to make those women feel beautiful made her find something to wake up for every day.

### **Gulee**

Gulee is an interesting thirteen-year-old; she was captured when she was eleven and spent a year under ISIS. I first met Gulee and her mother during one of the Arabic sessions held in Hayat's NGO. Gulee wasn't a regular attendant because she was a school student and she wasn't interested in the lady salon or most of the other activities that the women did. She was extremely focused on her studies even during the summer vacation and she rarely showed any interest in interacting with the rest of the women. The only class she was interested in was the Arabic class because she was so eager to perfect her Arabic now that she was living in Dohuk. She made a much greater progress even more than her mother and was able to speak the language fluently in a very short period. Gulee was innocent looking and extremely small in size but what was particularly special about

her was her sweet smile that never left her face. Our encounters during the Arabic classes were mostly brief and she avoided getting into long conversations with anyone.

I did not plan to invade her privacy and never intended to include her in my research but I was deeply moved by how little interaction she made with anyone around her. She was very polite and remarkably intelligent but her shyness made it difficult for anyone to approach her and she ended up alone most of the time. The reason why she was seemingly withdrawn and spent most of her time in solitude was her deep longing for her best friend who was still under ISIS. She had not heard any news about her friend since her release and return to Dohuk and her friend's illness made her even more concerned about her fate. Despite this longing, Gulee was extremely hopeful that her friend will return, but more importantly the young girl was extremely hopeful about life.

*I have a lot of hope she will be freed soon; this is the one thing I keep asking God for. But I miss her and I'm worried about her health. She is my only friend.*

The period Gulee spent in captivity gave her courage and determination to face life and she was determined to become a medical doctor, which is why she was focused on excelling in school. Gulee was too determined and task oriented about her goals in life, she almost seemed to be in a race against time. At first I thought that the reason why she wanted to be a doctor was because it was a prestigious job and certainly because there was a need in her community, but for Gulee the reason was personal, it was about her best-friend. By becoming a doctor Gulee wanted to do in her adulthood, what she failed to do as a child. She wants to be in control and to have the ability to cure others which is something she could not do to her friend.

Gulee is one among a new generation of Yezidis who have been uprooted from the traditional life back in Sinjar. The tough experience she has gone through together with the

challenging environment she currently lives in, has stirred in her a desire to grow and advance beyond the traditional norms that were dictated by her society. She is determined to learn and to work unlike her mother and older generations who did not invest in their education and careers because they grew up back in the villages of Sinjar where there was little exposure to the outside world.

### **Anhar**

I was first introduced to Anhar through a common friend. Anhar was a beautiful, educated lady in her late twenties. She was extremely well-dressed, westernized and was fluent in Arabic and English besides Kurmanji. It was clearly obvious that she came from an affluent family, and when introducing herself she mentioned that she was a “Sheikha”, a title given to upper-class Yezidis. Anhar worked as a counselor in an NGO that helps Yazidis, particularly females who have just returned from ISIS. I was not planning to include Anhar in the research because at first I only saw her as a channel that would link me to the “victims” but as time went by and as those stereotypes began to crumble, I decided to include her in the research.

Anhar was very helpful in assisting some of the meetings I had with Yezidi survivors, particularly Sabah, but I had not known much about Anhar until one time when we were visiting the holy city of Lalish, this is when she told me her story of hiding in her house for 10 days. She was however, reluctant at first to share her experience. It could be due to the fear and pain that she experienced when recalling the memory and it could also be due to the fact that she positioned herself as the person giving help and therefore wanted to avoid exposing her vulnerabilities. Her own experience however, became the reason behind her ability to help those women. Anhar

believes that her experience of hiding in the house and her departure from Sinjar resulted in a massive personal transformation. Anhar describes herself before the events as an extremely self-centered and spoilt girl but after the events things changed completely for her.

The terror she experienced developed in her a sense of compassion towards survivors because she knew that she could have easily been in their shoes. She was now spending most of her time visiting survivors in the camps and counseling survivors who came to the NGO. Anhar lives with her mother and sister in an apartment in the city of Dohuk, while her brother is currently living in Germany. Although her mother had insisted on not leaving Iraq permanently, they do spend a lot of time in Europe with her brother.

Anhar's experience during the capture of Sinjar was a source of transformation that made her reevaluate everything in her life. Her struggle with those fearful memories drove her to help those dealing with traumatic memories by counseling them in their journey of recovery. There was also another significant factor in Anhar's life which drove her to help survivors, and that was her sense of loneliness. Anhar explains that "she feels alone in life," her father died, her brother was in Germany, her mother was a sick lady and she was not close to her sister. Anhar was also conscious of the fact that she was not married and didn't have children, and part of the way she dealt with her sense of loneliness was to connect with those women, who eventually became "her family" as she once described them. The reward was mutual, the women felt cared for and for Anhar spending time with the women helped diminish her sense of loneliness and gave her a greater purpose to live for.

Although Anhar was extremely helpful in connecting me with the women, my experience with the NGO she worked in was not the same. There was a lot of mistrust and suspicion shown by the Scandinavian lady who heads the NGO. The only reason I was finally granted access to

survivors was because I made a deal with the Scandinavian lady to provide free medical services through the NGO I was helping with, in exchange for attending some interviews with Anhar.

### **Sabah**

Sabah was a regular visitor to YAZNA, but more than being a client, she was a dear friend of Anhar. This relationship would have not naturally developed back in Sinjar given the social and cultural differences between the two ladies, but the new setting and the experience they have lived seemed to dissolve social and cultural barriers. Sabah and her three children were taken as captives during the siege of Sinjar. I accidentally happened to know during a conversation that she had a fourth child who was still in captivity but she rarely mentioned anything about her. Missing family members was so common that most Yezidis were grateful if only one or two of their family members were still alive. The reason why Sabah never mentioned anything about her missing fourth child remains unknown to me but it was a topic she avoided speaking about. But there was also a strong sense of guilt that she felt towards her missing child which she always had to camouflage, by emphasizing how she did her best to save her children.

Sabah was released from ISIS three months prior to my visit and was now living with her husband and three children. What was notable was that her body still carried marks of the time she spent in captivity. When I first saw Sabah's hair during a visit to her shelter in the camp, I was struck by how unevenly cut her hair was, which is why she normally covered it by a loose scarf. Her daughter also had the same uneven hair cut with areas in her hair completely shaved off as. As I continued to observe her face and body there were other signs that could not be missed. As she pulled her breast out to feed her youngest child I was able to see some bruises and scars on her chest, but there was also a huge tattoo on her breast of a word in Kurmanji. When she realized I



was looking at her tattoo, she looked back at me and smiled explaining that this was Abu-Amar's name – her husband.

*This name kept me going those past months, I missed him a lot and did not know if he would have me back or not, but I did all I can to preserve myself and our children.*

The love Sabah had for her husband as he passionately waited for her return; refusing to abandon her against all social norms was crucial in her journey of recovery. Abu-Amar's love for her made her overcome feelings of shame and rejection. In Sabah's situation romance was an important coping strategy that helped her move on. Her husband's promise to make her another wedding now that she is back was also of great significance to her. Besides it being a reminder of their wedding which she described as the best day in her life, there was also something restoring in knowing that she would be celebrated after the shame she had experienced.

Sabah worked hard on restoring families of those around her as well. She was a strong advocate that families should accept the return of girls who were abducted and raped and she worked hard to help many of the families accept their daughters. The fact that her husband patiently waited for her return and accepted her drove her to fight for other girls' right to return. More importantly this was also the way she dealt with her sense of guilt over her missing child. It was surprising to see that she was willing to give so much detail and talk openly about a lot of what she has been through but turned silent and never mentioned anything about her missing child. It was easier for Sabah to talk about the humiliation she had experienced than to talk about her missing daughter. Her defensive tone when narrating how her child was lost and that she did her best signifies the pain she was dealing with and her longing for the return of her missing child.

This chapter has introduced the reader to the five main interlocutors of this research; Hayat, Sahar, Anhar, Gulee and Sabah. As shown, these five Yezidi women vary in age, background, personal traits and interests but they have all survived a specific historical moment - the Yezidi genocide. The next chapter reveals how each woman experienced the siege of Sinjar by looking at the effect that trauma has on memory. Besides the five main interlocutors, the chapter also includes accounts given by other informants to show the interplay between the individual and the collective experience.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Narrating the Yezidi Genocide: The fall of Sinjar**

#### **Memory and trauma**

An important question arises, what is the relevance of narrating those accounts? After all, these women are not public figures, they are nameless, faceless, and their accounts do not offer reliable historical facts. The question of whether or not to integrate survivors' accounts in the historiography of genocide is not a new one. Historians of genocide have intentionally avoided oral testimonies due to the crucial role that memory plays. It is memory that allows witnesses to access their experiences but the "tricks" that memory plays can easily jeopardize the credibility of those accounts (La Capra, 2016). As Stanley Cohen (2001) puts it, memory is not a filing cabinet that we open to examine a pre-selected file but it is rather a book we are writing and editing and the more ambiguous the event, the more room there is for this memory work (Cohen, 2001).

The need to include first hand testimonies was awakened at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century particularly in relation to Holocaust survivors. Approaching a time when the last survivors of the Holocaust would have died created an urge to document survivors' accounts. This was further emphasized by members of second and third generations of Holocaust survivors who have come to acknowledge the ways in which the traumatic memories of their family members have been passed on to them (Postone, 2003). Testimonies are important in understanding experience and its aftermath and part of that includes understanding the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with, repressing and denying the past. Even if a survivor's account may include factual inaccuracies, distortions, imaginative transformation, denial or repression, these issues do not invalidate the experience in entirety. The survivor is not only reliving the experiences in the process of recalling but is working over and working through his or her memory (Postone, 2003). Selma Leydesdorff, author of "Surviving the Bosnian Genocide" notes that when interviewing her Bosnian survivors, she was thoroughly confronted with fragmented memories. Leydesdorff notes that in all the accounts she heard there were only shreds of memory and incomplete narrative. Memory is fragmented this is how it presents itself after such trauma. (Leydesdorff, 2011).

Understanding the nature of trauma is essential to be able to understand its effect on memory. The term trauma was originally used to refer to an injury inflicted on the body but was later integrated into psychiatry to become known as a wound that is inflicted not upon the body but the mind. This breach in the mind's experience of time and the self in relation to the world is unlike the wound of the body, a simple healable event, rather it is an event that is experienced too soon and in an unexpected manner that makes it incomprehensible. It is therefore not available at the level of consciousness until it imposes itself again be it in repeated nightmares or actions (Caruth, 1996).

Research done on memory of war and genocide have revealed that trauma has the ability to drastically alter memory; this can be by repressing the recollection of difficult events causing them to be highly fragmented or inconceivable. Alternatively, trauma can cause those memories to be of extreme clarity to the extent that the survivor can relive those events again and experience physical symptoms when recalling those events (Chaitin & Steinberg, 2013). When interviewing traumatized people everything seems distant yet extremely close, in the past but happening now (Brehm & Fox, 2016). As Cathy Caruth (1996) contends, the return of the traumatic experience is an unconscious attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. In other words, trauma is a story of a wound that cries out in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available. The interesting aspect of trauma is that it is not only a sign of destruction but also of survival, the repetition or re-visitation of the traumatic experience in this sense is not simply an attempt to grasp that one has almost died but more profoundly an attempt to claim that one has survived (Caruth, 1996)

The crucial role that trauma plays in altering memory was significantly tangible during the interviews I conducted for this research. It is worth mentioning that I chose to focus on those five women because a lot of the women I interviewed were unable to speak. For many others who were willing, narrating those memories led to all kinds of physical and psychological reactions that were hard to control because of their inability to separate the past from the present. This became even more visible when there was sexual assault involved. At times the memory of rape or torture was extremely overpowering that the victim would start reliving the experience, shaking and falling to the ground. This was the story of one of the victims I met in Camp Be'adra. She was a woman in her late 30s who had spent a humiliating year in captivity. When I first met her I was struck by her sight, she did not look like a helpless victim but rather like an angry beast. Her legs were too wide

apart and her knees bent. She was unable to close her legs while walking or sitting and her ear lobes were torn which was a common feature in many raped victims, where the rapist would snatch the girls' earrings from her ears. The girl was constantly screaming, rocking her chair until she fell to the ground. Her body would shake uncontrollably until her mother took her back home. I was told she was raped over thirty times! No one could bear or handle the presence of this girl, as much as they pitied her. Her presence was a constant reminder of the trauma they had lived.

Rape and sexual assault have become strongly associated with the Yezidi genocide both in the minds of an outsider and in the collective memory of Yezidis. In every conversation I had the issue of rape was mentioned. Those who were not raped felt great victory and were less ashamed than those who did. At times, the issue of rape was openly discussed when the individuals did not experience rape themselves and at other times it was the elephant in the room. The victim may not have openly talked about the details of her rape but memories haunted her causing physical symptoms that spoke louder than the words she could have shared. At times silence surrounding rape was achieved by the use of indirect and metaphorical language. Veena Das (2007) in her powerful ethnography on raped and abducted women during the 1947 partition in India notes that when it came to the issue of rape there was a zone of silence surrounding the narrative. At times, this silence was achieved through the use of language that was general and metaphoric but avoided description of any specific event, or by describing surrounding events but leaving the actual experience of rape unstated (Das, 2007).

I was warned to avoid any physical interaction not to even shake hands with any woman because any physical touch could stimulate memories of how her body was violated. This was very unusual to a culture where women greeted each other by kissing each other on the cheek. An Egyptian friend and social worker had told me the story of how during a visit to the camp a Yezidi

girl fainted when she heard his Egyptian accent; she later explained that her rapist was an Egyptian ISIS militant. One of the girls I met could not lift her head up, for an entire hour she could not look me in the eye and could not speak a single word. Suicide attempts were also very common particularly when the girls were still in captivity. To many of the raped girls, their physical bodies were a constant reminder of the humiliation they experienced which caused them to despise their bodies in the most damaging ways. The hatred they felt towards their bodies was translated into pulling out their hair and injuring themselves. I was advised to buy body lotions and cream when meeting a victim of rape to help her be kind to her body. Even in the case of many girls who were not enslaved, rape was a constant threat. Faiza was a lady I met in Camp Be'adra when I was in the company of Hayat and Sahar. Faiza managed to flee with her husband when ISIS attacked, but since the events she has been getting constant nightmares of militants raping her. The nightmares were so intense that she began fearing her own husband. Faiza shared her story because she was so desperate to make her marriage work but those nightmares were constantly in the way. Nightmares are always a common element in the accounts of survivors of mass atrocity; research on survivors of the Armenian and Rwandan genocide have shown that nightmares were pervasive for both victim groups but particularly Tutsi survivors because the images of violence are still fresh in their consciousness (Miller&Miller, 2004).

Gaps and silences were an eminent feature of all the accounts given. It is important to distinguish the forms of silence that may exist. Sometimes silence may come in the form of abstinence and denial to the extent of amnesia. The individual may fail to deal with such painful memories that denial and abstinence become the only resort. I recall Hany, Dalal's eldest son and I remember him well because this was my first camp visit in Iraq, it was in Camp Khanki. This camp was particularly impoverished and hosted the underprivileged Yezidis. I had passed by

Dalal's family that day because the children were in need of shoes. The children had no shoes to protect their feet from the excruciating summer heat and the harsh winter conditions. Dalal was excited to see her children wearing shoes for the first time in a long time. There was however a young man sitting at the side of the humble shelter, he was her older son. He moved his head from side to side but avoided any direct eye contact, and neither spoke nor moved. I did not know what he went through but it was a state of abstinence from life. Dalal later explained that he saw an ISIS militant kill his best friend and since then he became like a child, even younger than his five-year-old sister. Since that day he could no longer speak or move his legs or function at all.

At other times, silences and gaps may come in the form of giving different bits and pieces of information over the course of several interviews almost like a puzzle where the bits and pieces have to be matched together. This was the case of the majority of interviews. They were not thoroughly articulated and did not come from a single interview. This was particularly evident in the case of Gulee and Sabah. None of the ladies have provided information or details on how they managed to escape, we know that in both cases a broker helped them but not much has been said about the details of the escape. Similarly, Gulee did not say much about her ill friend and Sabah never mentioned details about her missing child until much later. Denial was particularly common because a lot of the survivors were afraid that giving details about their experience could harm their captive relatives. This was the case with Malvine, one of the girls I interviewed during a visit to Lalish. I knew from Malvine's counselor that the girl and her mother have survived an extremely brutal experience during their captivity, but she refused to give any details because she feared that revealing such information could be dangerous to her cousin who was still in captivity. When introducing herself Malvine told me that she was lucky she was not captured and that they managed

to escape before ISIS came in, but she explained that her cousin is still in captivity and her owners are asking for one hundred thousand dollars for her release.

There were several gaps in the narrative as in the case of Hayat and Sahar, they both repeatedly expressed that there were no men left in the family even though we know from Hayat that she called her brother (which could be her cousin) when ISIS first attacked. This belief that there were no men left in the family clearly demonstrates the sense of abandonment that the two ladies have experienced. It also affirms Hayat's perception of herself as an empowered woman who was able to survive and help others despite the absence of men in the family. Research shows that people's recollections influence their self-perception and vice-versa. Memories may be altered or distorted to support certain aspects that the person believes of himself and it is therefore a way of maintaining self-coherence. In this sense, memories remain consistent with the individual's self-image and goals, which is why Hayat repeatedly claimed that there were no men in the family (Chaitin & Steinberg, 2013).

When narrating such accounts one may become voiceless, this does not mean the absence of speech but one can become voiceless even when using words. At times the individual even when talking about a personal experience can choose to distance oneself from the words spoken. The words spoken are frozen and lifeless almost as if there is another voice doing the narration (Das, 2007). This type of silence is much subtler to identify because despite the interviewee's willingness to speak and give information they were almost not present in the conversation or it was as if they were speaking about a different person other than themselves.

It is also worth noting that the sharing of traumatic memories is not only difficult for the victim narrating the events but also for the listener. The listener comes to be a participant or even



a co-owner of the traumatic event and gradually begins to partially experience the trauma himself as he begins to empathize with the victim's emotions, feels his injury and experiences his confusions and this creates a living connection to the past in the present not only for the narrator but the listener to (Brehm & Fox, 2016). This became a recurring theme during the time I spent with those women, even hours after the interview my mood was still affected by the interviews which often manifested in repeated nightmares. Inevitably, this also has an impact on the narration of those events as the listener's imagination and memory of the accounts heard impact what he writes.

As problematic as memory may be, the integration of survivors' accounts into historiography is indispensable. Leydesdorff asserts that the first step in writing the history of any grand trauma is to break the silence by giving voice to the victims (Leydesdorff, 2011). However, I must add that while conducting those interviews I realized that the idea of breaking the silence and giving voice to the victim is not as heroic as it is often depicted. Without empathy which Cathy Caruth sheds light to in her work on trauma (Caruth, 1996) the need to break the silence may be driven by a need to know information which may come at the expense of the victim who has to deal with the pain inflicted. Das (2007) puts it best in the following quotation:

"It is often considered the task of historiography to break the silences that announce the zones of taboo. There is even something heroic in the image of empowering women to speak and to give voice to the voiceless. I have myself found this a very complicated task, for when we use such imagery as breaking the silence; we may end by using our capacity to "unearth" hidden facts as a weapon. Even the idea that we should recover the narratives of violence becomes problematic when we realize that such narratives cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved."

It must be noted that survivors' non-neutrality in telling their testimonies does not make those testimonies less true. Historian Dominique La Capra, commenting on the importance of

survivors' accounts, notes that memory can as a matter of fact accurately supplement or even correct written history and recorded archives, even the "tricks" that memory tends to play and the reasons for their occurrence are themselves valid and valuable objects of historical scrutiny (La Capra, 2016). By accepting the memories of others, even if they are peculiar and unpleasant, we are laying the foundation for a legitimate and democratic approach into the future (Leydesdorff, 2011). Which is why according to LaCapra, memory of trauma is a prominent feature of history that should not be "airbrushed or denied" (LaCapra, 2016).

For survivors, the sharing of such experiences helps by giving relevance and context to what they have gone through, when people tell their stories they create a place for themselves in the world. Those autobiographical memories are not only relevant for the individual alone but for the community as a whole. This is due to the fact that the relationship between autobiographical memory which relates to the individual and collective memory which Halbwachs (1992) defines as knowledge relating to the past that is shared, mutually acknowledged, and reinforced by collective groups, is inseparable. In this sense there is a connection between the culture and the psyche. An event experienced at the collective level of the community supplies the substance of the trauma which will be manifested in the individual experience and in return, individual suffering is a sign of the trauma experienced as the collective level (Fassin&Rechtman, 2009)

The connection between the individual and collective memory becomes more apparent when discussing genocide, this type of memory is commonly known as "cultural trauma" (Brehm &Fox, 2016). Cultural trauma characteristically applies to a memory shared by a group of people that relates to mass atrocity. Consequently, memory is also responsible for creating and affirming collective feelings. Volkan (2006) explains that the "injured selves" of the victims of the trauma are transmitted to the next generation and the next generation passes it onto the next, the result is

that the group continuously unconsciously “chooses” the representation of the ancestor’s traumatic event as a significant element in their group identity, which can become reactivated when the groups senses a danger from “others.” An example of this is the Israeli-Palestinian case, where the Holocaust is the chosen trauma for the Jews and al Naqba is the chosen trauma for Palestinians (Chaitin & Steinberg, 2013).

This has been a common theme in all the accounts I heard from different Yezidis, Yezidis did not see that the ISIS siege was an abrupt event in history but it was remembered in light of an acquired identity that presents Yezidis as a historically persecuted group who have endured more than 70 genocide attempts. Stories of past persecutions are alive in the minds of present day Yezidis to the extent that most of the tactics the women used during their captivity were passed on from older generation. This is not a surprise given the importance of oral tradition in Yezidism. Since no Yezidi owns a copy of the black book, most Yezidis rely on oral tradition in transmitting knowledge of the Yezidi faith. This transgenerational trauma of 74 separate genocides is alive in the Yezidi collective memory and remembered in their folklore. One Yezidi song which Yezidis have commonly recited in the past is a lamentation about the 1837 genocide, when Hafez Pasha and his troops surrounded Sinjar Mountain. In this song the name of Hafiz Pasha was introduced at the end of each verse and it became habitual that women would gather at night and recite this song to remind themselves of the past (Otten, 2017).

This transferrable nature of trauma from one generation to the next elicits an important question, should we remember the atrocities of the past or should we forget them? In his controversial work “*In praise of Forgetting*”, David Rieff (2016) raises a very sobering question of what exactly is gained-and lost-by remembering. Has the conventional wisdom of those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it helped in preventing atrocities from

happening? Rieff suggests that remembering may actually cause injustice to the present much the same way that forgetting does to the past, arguing that in some occasions when collective memory condemns people to feel the historic wounds of their ethnic groups, it is not the duty to remember that should be honored but rather the duty to forget (Rieff, 2016). While it is true that in many ways collective memory has resulted in societies being both unforgiving and unforgiven, yet forgetting cannot happen until healing does and this may take several generations or else we may fall into the pit of denial. Stanley Cohen (2001) explains that historical memories about suffering in distant places are prone to thorough and speedy deletion through the politics of ethnic amnesia. This happens when people or governments are presented with information that is too disturbing and threatening to be fully absorbed which results in the information being repressed, reinterpreted or pushed aside. The repressed pain according to Cohen is never really forgotten it remains somewhere in there and the terrible outcome of repression is repetition and leakage. As much as we try to repress , the repressed will sooner or later pay an unwelcomed visit . This is what it means that the past keeps coming back to haunt you (Cohen, 2001). The most obvious example of a state-organized attempt to conceal atrocity is the eighty years of denial of the Armenian genocide by Turkey, in which Turkey succeeded in coercing the U.S and other governments to support the denial until the fiftieth anniversary of the atrocity when a new generation of Armenians began to break the silence and reclaim their history (Cohen, 2001).

It is rather a more pressing need to remember when dealing with Iraq, a country where persecution and oppression have often gone unnoticed. The Anfal campaign against the Kurds, or as Lemarchand (2011) calls it “the forgotten genocide” of the Kurds is hardly remembered anywhere outside the borders of Kurdistan, partly due to the U.S effort at the time to silence the event which came at the peak of the Iran-Iraq war, a time when Saddam was an important ally for

the U.S (Lemarchand, 2011). The history of oppression and silencing that Iraqi minorities have gone through presents a stronger case of the need to give voice to Yazidis, a minority group most of the world has not heard of before 2014.

It is interesting to note that despite this identity of a historically persecuted people group, most Yazidis have expressed that they all “lived in peace” before the events and they all referred to the years prior to the genocide in collective rather than individualistic. Hayat, Sahar, Gulee and Anhar have used terms like “we were living quietly”, “we were living a simple but happy life.”, “and We Yazidis were very naïve”, “there were no problems before that”. All the women viewed the years prior to the events in more positive terms, Sabah recalls that they were living happily “until ISIS came”, even Sahar who was devastated by her father’s death still viewed the days back in Sinjar as more peaceful and better, similarly Hayat who have repeatedly emphasized that she lost most of the men in her family during the civil strife of 2006-2007 still viewed the days prior to ISIS in more positive terms. This tendency to view the years prior to the siege in more positive terms goes in accordance with many of the literature written about Genocide. Brehm and Fox (2016) in their study of the Rwandan genocide found that all survivors have referred to the years prior to 1994 in more positive language. Consequently, this leads to a clear divide in time into distinct eras, the pre and the Post genocide (Brehm & Fox 2016). This tendency reveals the extent to which people’s lives have been damaged and irreversibly altered as a result of the events leading to a nostalgic view of the past as better and more peaceful. August, 3, 2014, has become this dividing line between the pre and the post genocide eras.

### **Rise and Fall: The Fall of Sinjar and the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate**

The accounts that those women give do not just provide information on how they survived the siege on a personal level but they also shed light on how sectarian politics are put to action on

a much larger scale. Hayat's account offers insight on the dynamics between Yezidis, the Kurdish government and ISIS prior to the siege, but more importantly it reveals the intentionality of ISIS to eradicate this people group solely on the basis of religion.

For Hayat, August, 3, was a day like any other day. It was around noon and she was getting ready to leave home heading to her afternoon shift in the hospital. There were rumors going on for over a month that ISIS are going to attack, but she has not given ear to any of that because they were under the protection of Kurdish fighters and she felt confident about the promises of the Kurdish government. This time it was different.

*I could hear a lot of noise outside as the neighbors started packing making their way out of Sinjar, but I was still reluctant to believe. I was getting dressed ready to go to work but I thought to call my brother (this could also refer to a cousin) first to check. He too was on his way to work and was unsure about what was happening, but as he drove out of our village, the rumors were now confirmed. It was clearly a conspiracy, a plot against Yezidis. They starting by destroying our place of worship, and then they blew Shiite mosques and memorials. Even when we tried to flee we were told that there was nothing going on and we were told to go back home which is why it was clearly a conspiracy. It was hard for us to believe at first because we were under the protection of Kurdish fighters and for months, Kurdish fighters and ISIS men were regularly participating in religious rituals together and praying together in the same mosques, so we did not ever think that in one day things will turn upside down and they will start fighting. Those who had cars were able to move out of Sinjar but I did not. We had to walk all the way to the mountain and hide there but I never thought we would stay there for two weeks. Never did I think that I would be*

*responsible for the survival of my family and others, specially my sister in law who was shot and bled to death.*

It is worth noting that the shock Yezidis experienced is not just because the outbreak of any war is always shocking, but the shock in this case is due to the fact that Yezidis felt that this was a conspiracy. The term “betrayal” was used in many accounts and even though most Yezidis feared speaking about politics or giving any explanation of why they felt betrayed, the language used suggests that it was the Kurdish government they felt betrayed from. Hayat explains that ISIS men and Kurdish fighters were praying together for months in the same mosques which points to the fact that there was some sort of union on the basis of religion. In one day however, things changed and she goes on to explain that this was a conspiracy against Yezidis because even when they tried to escape they were told that there was nothing going on. Regardless of whether this holds some levels of truth or not, it does point to how Yezidis as a minority group perceive themselves in relation to the larger Islamic majority. Yezidis who are Kurdish in ethnicity but are not Sunnis believe that they have been betrayed by their protectors, the Kurds, to their Sunni counterparts. Taking this further, Hayat sheds light on how the Islamic caliphate operates by explaining that they started by destroying the places of worship which is the exact implementation of Baghdadi’s and his predecessor, Al-Zarqawi’s philosophy of fighting the enemy within to purify the Caliphate before fighting the distant enemy. As will be revealed in different accounts unlike any case of war where an invading army purposefully destroys any infrastructure, ISIS does not do that they rely on using the existing infrastructure for their governance but it is the places of worship that they single out for destruction. It is also worth noting that within this genocidal mode of operation, ISIS has used different strategies with different religious groups based on an established hierarchy of discrimination. For ISIS, Yezidis, being devil worshippers are the primary

targets that must be cleansed. Shiites follow, being deviators from Islam must also be severely punished for their apostasy. In the case of Christians, who are considered the people of the book, ISIS did not use the same genocidal strategies as explained by many of the Christians I interviewed during my stay. Abou-Fadi , a bus driver originally from Mosul who has moved to Dohuk with his family, explains how the homogenization of Mosul was happening gradually and while Christian possessions were taken they had the choice of running for their lives unlike Yezidis.

*You think ISIS is new, everything was changing in Mosul gradually, it did not happen all at once, there were visible changes happening, we were seeing more women in khemar and more men with beards, even little girls were getting veiled. They began to take over the city before they kicked us out. It became very difficult for us to live there just because we looked different and we stood out from the majority. My daughter is only five years old and she was always scared, one time she was out but returned back home quickly and hid under the table. The whole society was changing; they were taking over. She was always in a state of panic and at first I didn't want to leave because it was our city but sooner or later we had to whether we like it or not. They took all Christians to the court and they asked us either to convert to Islam or to leave Mosul. We all chose to leave but we didn't know that we will be thrown out. We were not allowed to go back home and pack or even take anything with us; they took us and drove us out of the city because our belongings were now theirs. I came out with my family and my mobile, nothing else, no money, no jewelry no clothes except what we were wearing.... nothing.*

Although Christians have suffered greatly; most have lost all their possessions and were now living in refugee camps or in deserted buildings in the city, there still is a clear distinction between the status of Christians and that of Yezidis who are treated as war booty. This distinction becomes



clear in the account given by Alfred of his miraculous rescue from death. Alfred who was originally from Mosul is now living together with his brother's family in Camp Sharia. This camp hosts Christians, Shiites and Yezidis who have come from different parts of Iraq. Alfred asserts that it is Christ who saved him from a near death experience at the hands of ISIS.

*I was in the famous bus incident where hundreds of Yezidis were killed. I took the bus to go to work but we were suddenly forced to stop. Militants came out of a vehicle and jumped on the bus to check our IDs. One of them after checking my ID and making a comment that I was Christian commanded me to immediately step out of the bus and I obeyed without thinking of the consequences. As I ran for my life all I could hear is the sound of shooting and as I looked behind me the bus was covered in blood. All the Yezidis inside were immediately killed for no reason other than religion. I was saved not because of anything but because I was the only Christian in the bus.*

Both accounts reveal the extent to which ISIS has intentionally targeted Yezidis, while Christians were given the option of running for their lives, Yezidis did not even have this choice to make. Those that managed to escape had to make this choice in the worse conditions not knowing what to expect.

### **Farewell Sinjar**

It is hard to imagine what it means to try to escape war on foot or the level of horror that Yezidis have experienced as they raced against time trying to get to the mountain when they were surrounded from all sides. For all the ladies interviewed in this research except Anhar, fleeing was on foot, some managed to escape and others were caught and those who managed to escape had to survive extremely difficult conditions the least of which is that they had to run without their shoes

on as will be revealed in Sahar's account. For Sahar, the process of fleeing and escaping was an extremely traumatic experience that could have meant the loss of her mother who was shot and severely wounded.

*It was around noon when we knew they had captured Sinjar. I ran to the mountain with my mother and younger brother and joined my aunt Hayat and my grandfather on the way. I was extremely terrified when I heard the news that I just ran without even putting my shoes on. People were running in terror trying to make it to the mountain, but it was a long and weary journey and we were soon surrounded by vehicles from all sides. I tried to stay close to my family but it was just difficult to stay together as fire broke loose. Men were pushing, women screaming and children falling to the ground. In a split of a second I looked around and I could not see my mother, I looked to the ground and there she was drenched in blood as my aunt Hayat dragged her all the way to the mountain. I did not believe that this was happening. There was nothing as painful as losing my father but now I was also losing my mother. I looked at her as she lay on the ground, trembling and screaming in pain and I just wished that I would die; I wished I was the one shot. I took my brother in my arms and we both cried.*

“Sophie's choice” is a famous saying that goes back to a famous novel and a film adaptation of the same name centered on Sophie; a mother of two children who has just arrived in Auschwitz and is forced to make a choice between two unbearable options whether to give up her son or daughter to the Nazis because only one of them can stay. In times of war and genocide people are faced with situations where they have to constantly make such agonizing choices. All the interlocutors were equally faced with such decisions at one point or another. Sahar and Hayat could have left Sahar's wounded mother as she bled to death but they chose to carry her to the mountain.

In the case of Anhar, both Anhar and her sister were faced with a serious decision of whether to leave their ill mother and run for their lives or stay with their mother and die together.

*We didn't believe that they were going to take over Shingal, we thought it was just a threat. There were Muslims living in the city, not so many but they were living with us and we never thought that ISIS will attack. On the day of the siege, people were frightened and started running away. Some went to the mountain and others who had cars and managed to flee early on went as far away as they could. We stayed! We couldn't move anywhere because our mother was bedridden and unable to move. My mother begged us to go with the rest and leave her in the house but my sister and I decided that we'd better stay and die together than to leave our mother. It was a difficult moment, we knew that if we left our mother she was going to die alone, either because of her state of health or they were going to find her in the house and kill her. Our only option was to hide in our house, the maids left and the houses around us from every side were empty but there was no way out for us. We just had to stay and hide, pretending that the house is deserted and we remained hiding for 10 days.*

### **Capture: Sorting and categorizing**

The accounts given by Hayat, Sahar and Anhar all provide insight on how different Yezidis survived the siege and fall of Sinjar; there are those who escaped and there are those who remained behind. There remains however, a significant group who have neither escaped nor remained but were captured and lived under the rule of the Islamic state. Gulee, the youngest of all the interlocutors describes her experience of how she got captured on that day.

*I had just turned eleven a few weeks before our village was taken. We all ran to the mountain when we knew that the Dawa'esh attacked but it was already too late they were surrounding us from every side. On the way, my friend and I were lost from our families and so we stayed close to a group of women but we were all eventually taken by the militants. There were lots of women of all ages, and girls even younger than we were. Young boys were also taken along with their mothers because they were to be trained to fight with the Dawaesh. Even those women, who were married, were taken from their husbands. My friend and I could not stop crying; we did not know if our parents were still alive or not or if we will ever see them again. We were all horrified but we could not even react we were dragged like sheep to a school and we remained standing there for hours. It was too crowded that I gripped my friend's hand firmly because we were both afraid we would lose each other.*

Gulee's account demonstrates that it was not only the women and girls who were the interest of ISIS but also young boys too. During one of the times I was participating in a clinic in camp Shariah I met a woman who brought her six year old son complaining that he has a mental illness when asked about details of the child's situation she explained that he had spent a year and a half in a training camp and since his release they can no longer control his aggression. His aggression was directed towards his family whom he started calling them infidels and one point tried to kill his younger brother. The boy had already been trained to chop off body parts and he was becoming a serious threat to his entire family. In writing about violence in South Africa, Arthur Kleinman explain how during Apartheid the definition of what it is to be a child is forcefully shaped by the experience of the ongoing violence in which children have played major roles. Families were singled out

for destruction which often meant that young boys were being forced to fight their fathers which caused a breaking in intergenerational connections (Das, Klienman, Ramphele ,&Reynolds, 2000). Although, it was still early to see how those young Yezidi boys trained to kill their own people could have an effect on intergenerational connection but the violence demonstrated by the young boys returning from ISIS is a source of alarm.

Besides being taken for military training, boys were also taken to be sold to those with pedophilic tendencies and this was something that Sabah was constantly trying to save her toddler from.

*It was 9:00 am when my husband and I heard the news that ISIS were taking over Yezidi villages. The roads were blocked so we could not drive out of the village. We rushed to the mountain, but on the way we were trapped. I suddenly found two vehicles before me and armed men came out pulling us like sheep. I begged them to let me go because I had children but they ended up taking my children as well. We were kept in a government building in the city where they kept us in custody for two days. They began separating the men from the women, and then separated the young unmarried girls from the rest of the females. This was the most horrifying day in my life, they saw that I was carrying Rashid, he was much younger then and because the boy is so beautiful they wanted to take him from me. Those dogs have no religion; they don't only want the women but the children too, some children were taken to the training camp and others were taken for other reasons...they like children, and as you can see Rashid is blond and his eyes are hazel. We tried to hide Rashid in blankets, if I saw one of those dogs approaching I would give Rashid to one of the women who kept him covered in a blanket until they passed.*

Sabah's account provides a lot of information on how the Islamic state sorts and classifies its war booties. We understand from Sabah's account that enslavement did not only affect women but it was about destroying the entire family, even though it was women who suffered the most. Sabah explains that there were men, women and children taken and there was a clear process of sorting and categorizing involved. Men are divided from women and among the women there is further classification and sorting based on age, virginity and beauty.

The narratives above give us a picture of what the first phase of the genocide was like which included attacking Sinjar and taking captives. The next chapter covers the second phase of the genocide which is the survival phase. If the first phase was a shocking and terrifying experience for all the women, the second phase was a gloomy, unchanging harsh reality as each woman struggled for survival amidst constant threats until they managed to escape and reach a safe place.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The struggle for survival**

Each woman faced different circumstances between the fall of Sinjar and their eventual release but for all of them survival was a daily struggle. There were those who were trapped in the mountain as in the case of Hayat and Sahar. There is Anhar who had to remain hiding in her house in the midst of a raging war and there are those who had to endure slavery under ISIS as in the case of Gulee and Sabah. For all the ladies, survival was not only about preserving oneself but also involved other family members too. This included every aspect of survival ranging from finding basic needs like food and water, hours of walking, fighting death and injuries, enduring slavery and minimizing their chances of being raped. In this chapter I will look at how those women managed to survive all the challenges they faced until they eventually managed to escape.

#### **A safe haven**

To many Yezidis, Mount Sinjar is a significant culture and historical symbol of Yezidism. The mountain has acted as a safe haven during many of the past genocides and has been equally crucial for the survival of Yezidis in the events of 2014. It is not an understatement when Yezidis say that they would not have survived if it wasn't for Mount Sinjar. The fact that they knew their way through the mountain meant that they could buy themselves time and hide there out of the reach of ISIS militants who did not know the mountain as well as they did. In the story of Hayat and Sahar, Mount Sinjar becomes the safe haven where they spend two weeks until the Peshmerga clears the way and they manage to escape. This is the account that Hayat gives of the time she spent in the mountain:

*We remained hiding in the mountain for thirteen days and during that time we saw death every single day. People were dying in front of our eyes. But I knew that if we managed to survive this long without eating or drinking then certainly we were going to make it. We only had one bottle of water and each of us would just take a sip and pass it on to the person next to them until we consumed all the water we had. We then started to remove rocks from the mountain and lick the residue of water that was stored after seasons of rain just to keep ourselves hydrated. For dinner, one of the men would catch a straying lamb and we would all share our food together. I had to think of ways to ensure that my family was going to be well. My father was already ill and being in the mountain for this long was a threat to his health and my sister in law was also in a very critical state, I had to take care of them all.*

Survival did not only mean food and water or enduring the harsh mountain conditions but for Hayat survival entailed rescuing lives of those who were injured by ISIS during the siege. Hayat's sister in-law(Sahar's mother) was shot in her back and hip during the escape and for two weeks Hayat had to nurse her until they managed to escape to Syria when the Kurdish fighters opened the way, and from Syria they took her to a hospital in Erbil.

*They started shooting us when we tried to escape to the mountain. My father saw her covered in blood and he did not have any hope that she could make it but I dragged her to a safe haven. All that I was able to find is a pain killer and a Voltaren injection, so I quickly covered the wound, pressing hard on the layers of cloth to control the blood flow. I was able to control the bleeding and for two weeks I had to look after her in such conditions. I carried her all the way through to Syria on my back and I did not even have shoes on. When we arrived to the hospital, the Doctors were amazed to hear what happened. She*



*stayed in the hospital for 12 days, the surgeon could not perform an operation because this had to be done immediately after she was shot but she had to stay there and recover gradually. It was not only my sister in law that I helped, there was a man almost dying from dehydration, his wife and two children were losing hope and I only had very little water left but I gave him all that we had and I did the necessary first aid steps.*

The journey Hayat makes from Mount Sinjar to Rojava in Syria, which was the exit road that the Peshmerga and American forces opened for Yezidis, is 113 hours of walking. Needless to mention that she was carrying Sahar's injured mother during this journey until they reached a hospital in Syria and from Syria they made their way to Kurdistan, after her sister in law received some treatment.



Hayat's sister in law was not the only person that she managed to rescue but there were other stories of people who managed to survive with the help of Hayat.

*God gave me strength and courage to face the situation and help others during the time we spent hiding in the mountain. My father keeps telling me that they would not have survived if I was not there. Since the events of Sinjar, I decided to give my life to helping others. I want to be a bridge to help people cross from their hardships to a better life. I know that I could choose to live for myself but later on I will surely regret this because I would be dying twice; a natural death and a moral death if others were not receiving help. Now, I know that even if I perish, there are many others who will survive because I have enabled them.*

The courage and heroism that Hayat felt during the days in the mountain carry a different reality to what her niece Sahar felt about those days they hid in the mountain. For Sahar, who broke in tears as she remembered her mother bleeding for 10 hours, those days were filled with horror and hopelessness.

*I watched my mother wrestle with death. We stayed in the mountain for 2 weeks. It was extremely scary at night, I could barely sleep from fear and just the idea that we were out there with no shelter was frightening but I was also scared to lose my mother. I did not want to close my eyes in case she needed anything. As days went by my mother started to improve but her wound was too deep she was unable to move. It seemed as though we were going to live hiding in the mountain forever, I could not even think that there could be a way out. For days I did not move from my place, I could not eat or drink or sleep or talk to anyone. I was almost idle. I can't even remember how the days passed.*

In the case of Anhar who remained hiding in her house for 10 days, fear was a constant reality as they expected death to visit them every single day.

*For ten days we locked ourselves in our house. We lived every day in fear waiting for them to attack at any minute. We patiently waited for death. We knew that they broke into many houses and stole people's possessions because it was now their legitimate right, and we just waited for our turn to come specially that our house was big and fancy. During those 10 days we didn't turn the lights or use any electrical devices. We didn't even turn the taps on, to make sure no one would hear the sound of water running and we didn't even cook so that the smell wouldn't reach them. We even could not talk to each other because it felt as if they were hiding behind the walls waiting to hear any sound to attack. Our movement inside the house was on the whole very limited not necessarily out of caution but we were almost paralyzed in fear. The fact that we did not know what was going on in the outside world made us even more scared. We did not even know if there were even any Yezidis left.*

### **Living as a Slave**

For all my interlocutors and many other Yezidis who remained hiding in the mountain, or in the case of Anhar who was locked in the house for 10 days, time was a very crucial factor. They did not know how long they were going to remain in their current situation or if there will ever be a way out. The situation however, was much worse for those in captivity; they had already lost track of time. Gulee who was only eleven when she was captured says that she knew when she was released that she had spent a year under ISIS during that time she was mostly locked in a prison cell in Mosul.

*After we were captured, we stayed in the school for a few days, and then we were taken to another school in Mosul. There we were kept in a place that looked like a prison cell. It was a dark place, there was only one small window with steel bars and there was a constant smell of dead, rotten mice. It was abhorrent in the beginning but by time we got used to it.*

*My friend and I were always holding hands crying and shivering from fear and there was no one to calm us down everyone was scared and everyone was struggling. We spent a few weeks in the prison cell during which we almost starved to death. Food and water were given in very limited quantities that were just enough to keep us from dying. We got each a piece of Samoon bread once a day with nothing else at all. We were constantly humiliated...they swore at us, hit us for no reason. At times, they would suddenly come in the middle of the night and immediately we would all jump off, shrinking back to the corners of the wall. They enjoyed seeing us frightened and they would ridicule us even more when they saw that we were scared. After the time I spent in this place in Mosul I was taken back with my friends and others to a house in Sinjar. This was a large house owned by a Sunni Amir called Abu- Hamed. There we were kept in a basement that was also like a prison in terrible condition.*

While we know from Hayat's account that the first thing ISIS did was to destroy the places of worship, what we see in Gulee's account is that ISIS relied on existing infrastructure for their governance. This is contrary to any war where an invading army purposefully destroys enemy's infrastructure, ISIS does not do that they rely on using the existing infrastructure but it is only the places of worship that they single out for destruction. This again proves the genocidal ideology of the Islamic caliphate that aims at eradicating Yezidis. Like Gulee, Sabah's account shows how the captives are constantly being moved between state owned infrastructures; this includes government buildings, Galaxy hall which is a wedding hall and Badush which is known for the Badush massacre where over 600 Yezidi prisoners were killed. It is also important to note that movement was not just between the borders of Iraq, but it was between area under the control of the Islamic state which includes both Iraq and Syria.

*After they separated us from our families, we were taken to a government building where we spent some time, then I was taken along with other women to another building where we stayed for six days...this was a main building (da2era tabe'a ela Kurdistan). We were then moved to Badush prison in the village of Tel a'far. We did not stay in one place for the entire time, we spent four months in a school and then we were taken to Mosul where we stayed in Galaxy Hall. This was the time when they started categorizing and selling the girls. There were a lot of people inside Galaxy Hall, they were Yezidis who came from different places in Sinjar and Mosul. One night, the guards came in and they took many of the young girls, leaving behind the older women. We were taken to Rekka in Syria. In Rekka we were taken to an underground cell but I haven't seen anything as horrible as that in my life. The place was covered in dirty water and sewage that two girls died from skin and breathing problems. I tried to press on and keep my children away from the jumping rats at night. The children were collapsing at this stage. Ali started having sudden spells of anger that stayed with him and Amira lost her ability to speak. We did not stay for long in the prison cell, we were then moved to another house also in Syria, in much better conditions, but this was the final round. They made us stand in one line and took several pictures with different pauses of each woman and wrote some information next to the pictures. Each day was a countdown; they took ten girls a day. My friend Sarah had several nervous breakdowns seeing that we were getting lesser by the day.*

One of the important strategies that ISIS used to practice their hegemony over Yezidis was in the form of a constant attempt to convert them to Islam. This obviously was through rape which in many cases was preceded by prayer according to many survivors' testimonies, but it also came in the form of forcing women to learn the Qur'an. This is one of the reasons why many of the ladies

refuse to communicate in Arabic because it is the language of the oppressor and the language they need to learn the Qur'an. It is also worth mentioning that pretending not to speak in Arabic was also a strategy used by the women so that they can understand what the guards are saying. Daniel (1996) explains a similar experience during the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri-Lanka where linguistic identity gained special prominence such that one group defined themselves against the other based on language to the extent that proving the inability of language was important to sustain an imagined community.

*They insisted on teaching us the Qur'an and made us memorize parts of it by force. I refused to do so by pretending that I can't speak Arabic. Most of us pretended that we cannot speak Arabic even those of us who mastered the language because it meant that the guards can speak freely and it was a useful way for us to gather any type of information.*

### **The commodification of the female body**

After attacking a village, [ISIS] splits women from men. . . [G]irls are stripped naked, tested for virginity and examined for breast size and prettiness. The youngest, and those considered the prettiest virgins fetch higher prices and are sent to Raqqa, the IS stronghold. There is a hierarchy: sheikhs get first choice, then emirs, then fighters . . . We heard about one girl who was traded 22 times, and another, who had escaped, told us that the sheikh who had captured her wrote his name on the back of her hand to show that she was his "property." (Welch, 2017)

With an estimated figure of 5,000 women enslaved, the Islamic state has managed to create a sophisticated trafficking system with a publicly open market. From the point of capture to sale, each girl is given the title of "sabaya" followed by her first name. The victim passes through a typical routine of being photographed and numbered to facilitate the purchase process. Victims end up being sold to other brokers, wealthy men or are given as a reward to fighters. The trafficking

system of ISIS provides a clear example of the intersection between sex and war economy. Not only are the fighters in need of “sex” to fight, but as a matter of fact this established trafficking system has brought back great revenue for the Islamic state, becoming the crime of choice for the funding of terrorism (Welch, 2017).

A significant aspect of survival for all the women was to protect their bodies from sexual assault. It was easier for them to die than to be raped because it was an issue of shame and honor not just for themselves but for their families and community as a whole. For Yezidi girls, the calamity was not only because of rape and abduction but mixing with non-Yezidis is prohibited in Yezidi culture. Yezidis believe that they are descendants of Adam and deny any link to Eve which means that intermarriage with non-Yezidis is prohibited in Yezidi culture and conversion is also not possible (Lamani & Momani, 2010). The return of thousands of raped girls is therefore not only shameful and destructive but it is also a deviance from the group’s identity. Das (2007) provides a similar example in her experience with Indian women who have experienced rape and abduction during the partition and were also seen to be violating norms and tradition. Those women used the metaphor of their experience being like drinking poison and keeping this poison within (Das, 2007). For these women as well as Yezidis, their bodies were carriers of poison that must be hidden from the public eye to avoid shame and scrutiny.

During the first interview I had with Hayat, she introduced herself by saying “we went through rape, suffering and humiliation.” It is worth noting that Hayat was not enslaved and therefore did not experience any kind of sexual assault at the hands of ISIS but rape had become a significant aspect of the community’s shared suffering that she internalized it as her own. For Hayat and Sahar the issue of rape was extremely important that they both dedicated their lives to help girls who have returned from ISIS, particularly raped victims. Similarly, Anhar always felt

that she could have been in those girls' shoes which prompted her to work in an organization that helps survivors. Because of the nature of her work, Anhar knew well how the trauma of rape can be destructive.

In the excerpt below Gulee explains what ISIS did to some of the girls and she proudly repeated at various points that she was not raped and that gave her a sense of dignity and victory as if it was something within her control.

*Every few days, guards came in and chose a few girls. Those girls would either be sold in the slave market or would be given as a reward for fighters. They started by taking the beautiful virgins, some of them were sold and never seen again but others returned back to the cell; those were raped by the guards and at times it involved gang rape. It was more like a form of entertainment to the guards, especially when they gathered around to play at night. Those girls came back broken and tormented. It was much easier if they did not come back at all, but I still remember the look on their faces, feeling sick and vomiting repeatedly, urinating constantly, pulling streaks of hair off their head and bumping their heads to the wall. We all tried to comfort each other; there were many things that I did not know in life until I was there. They then started selling away some of the married women. My friend and I were lucky that they did not touch us (sexually), No one touched me. Maybe because we were too young and there were plenty of beautiful young women, but they hit us badly... it was pure humiliation... I was willing to tolerate any condition as long as they did not touch me (sexually)” “I was told all kinds of names and we were beaten at times with whips and we were treated as slaves to the extent that when one of the guards wanted to take his shoes off he called me to do so for him. I was just a slave.*



Gulee broke into tears as she recalled the humiliation she saw under ISIS, but there was still however a clear distinction between sexual humiliation and other forms of physical but non-sexual humiliation. Anything was tolerable as long as it was not sexual. Gulee makes it clear that it was better for the raped girls not to return than to live with their shame. This clear distinction between sexual and non-sexual violence is due to the fact that rape and sexual assaults are usually regarded as different from physical aggression. In the minds of the interlocutors and in a closed Middle Eastern society as such, rape is usually associated with unlawful sex and the taboo of a girl losing her virginity, but it is not associated with violence and aggression in the same way that beating is. In this sense a victim of rape does not receive the same empathy that a victim of physical but non-sexual abuse receives.

I knew from Sabah that she was not raped but having endured the hardships of ISIS which also included various forms of physical and sexual humiliation, she felt great sympathy towards other girls. Sabah was intentional in making Yezidi families accept their raped daughters after their return. This was one of the main challenges that faced many girls, they did not know if they will be accepted by their families or not. In some cases the family would not accept the return of their raped daughter because of the stigma tied to it and they preferred that she died instead. The other challenge that the return of raped victims created for Yezidi society was that some of the girls were pregnant and this would create a huge problem for the child's ethnoreligious identity because one is either born Yezidi or is not. This means that the child the girl carried cannot stay with the mother. Milillo (2006) in examining rape as a tactic of war notes that violence towards women is not only intended to bring shame to the woman and her family but it is part of the larger goal of eliminating a certain ethnic group. Ethnic cleansing plays on the reproductive roles of women as the carriers of culture and by harming and shaming those women they are working towards the elimination of

the social group as a whole, while at the same time impregnating those conquered women with more superior and “desirable” genetic material (Milillo, 2006).

It is worth noting that most of the strategies that the women used to minimize their chances of rape are centered on the female body. The aim was to become as sexually repulsive as much as possible and the uglier you appeared the safer you are. A research done on Sudanese female survivors reveals that to avert sexual assault induced by the Sudanese government, Sudanese women used to cover their faces in mud, refused to shower and pretended that they were nursing mothers (Jok, 2006). Sabah’s account shows that she used the same techniques which she has learnt from her grandmother to protect her children from falling in the hands of their perpetrators during the time of their captivity.

*At first when we were in Galaxy hall, I bumped into a man I knew from our village. I begged him to act like we were married so that they will not take me from the kids. I searched for him every day but it was almost impossible to find him in the crowds, I could only keep hold of my own children. At the end of those four months they moved a group of us to another village in (El Khadra’ district) we were locked in a deserted house where there was no way out. Each week they came in and picked a few of us for sale. I tried to postpone this as much as I can and the only thing I could do was to look as ugly and filthy as possible so that they would not take me and the children, I was only trying to buy myself time. I covered my face in mud, and shaved large areas of my hair and the rest was randomly cut in an uneven fashion and most of it also covered in dust. I did the same with the children; I tried to make them look as ugly as possible and shaved large parts of my girl’s hair. I borrowed a pair of glasses which made me look much older and I also borrowed an oversized male blazer to hide my body. For a year I did not shower, I could have but I*

*wanted to be as repulsive as possible. Every week before they came in to pick a few of us for sale, I would do the same rituals for myself and the children. I really didn't care as long as we were not taken.*

The connection between rape and physical appearance was significant for the women even if in reality rape was just a strategy of war. One survivor, Baran, whom I did not meet but had heard a lot about and only managed to speak to her on the phone made a clear remark that she was lucky she was not that beautiful because it meant that she was raped less. Baran, was raped countless times but she still believes that her lack of beauty was a blessing compared to her best-friend who was stunning in beauty and was raped so many times that she ended up cutting her wrist. The importance given to physical beauty and outer appearance was also part of the healing process for survivors and this becomes clear when Sahar explains why she chose to work in the beauty Salon.

*I want to make those girls look and feel beautiful. Those Daesh guys want us because we are beautiful, it is not about religion or anything but they say Yezidi girls are too beautiful to be left alone. The result is most of those girls returning from ISIS are in self-hatred they try to end their lives because they feel so filthy and unworthy*

What Sahar said made a lot of sense given the popularity of the beauty salon every Tuesday. There was a deep longing in the women to look and feel beautiful after the experiences they had lived that made them feel shameful and unworthy. I was repeatedly advised when meeting victims of rape to give them gifts like body lotion, hair products or jewelry because they were accustomed to harming their bodies and they needed to start to develop different behaviors of taking care of their bodies instead of harming them.

**Family: All for one, one for all**

Family is a very significant and scared concept to all Yezidis, be it the immediate or extended family. It is very common to hear Yezidis refer to their uncles as their fathers and cousins as their brothers. The significance of family for all the women was a recurring theme that cannot be avoided. All the women fought for their survival of their families even more than themselves. This was evident in Anhar's story who preferred to die than leave her sick mother. Hayat fought for her family's survival particularly her old father and her injured sister in law and Sabah used all kinds of strategies to make sure that her children were safe. What was also significant is that family did not only mean the nucleus family but during such difficult times, all Yezidis felt that they were one family and that was a great source of strength that helped them endure their difficult circumstances. We know that Hayat did not only help her immediate family but she did help several other Yezidis who were close to death during the days they were hiding in the mountain. One particular story stood out the most for Hayat, which was the story of a woman going through labor. Hayat had not met this woman before but she helped her all night long until she delivered a beautiful baby boy. For Hayat, who was not married and had no children, this story was a sign of life and a beam of hope that no matter what ISIS tries to do to destroy the community there was a new generation of Yezidis being born.

For Gulee who was a young child the presence of other women was a great source of comfort to her and her best-friend, the women treated them as their children and this solidarity brought hope to the two girls.

*We would comfort ourselves at night by telling each other stories until we fell asleep. Sometimes we played games together at night like rock, paper, scissors, while the rest were sleeping and we would giggle and pretend like we were sleeping once one of the ladies wakes up complaining of the noise. All the ladies were kind to us, they had children and*

*knew the horror we were in. But, I was hopeful; I had hope that we were going to get freed. I did not know how or when but I soothed my friend everyday assuring her that this will not last.*

This social cohesion between Yezidis was evident particularly in Sabah's case. Throughout this account Sabah thoroughly uses "we" instead of "I" when narrating what happened. The women comforted each other when they were down, they feared together, laughed together and they planned together how to get rid of the guard.

*Living conditions were horrible, there was very little food and the food we were given was always rotten, I had to try it out first before giving it to the children. Each night that passed was a living hell, we could not sleep because we were afraid they would come in the night and take us, but we tried to arrange ourselves each night so that a few women would stay awake all night to watch over us while the rest would try to sleep. I encouraged Sarah (one of the ladies in captivity who became a close friend of Sabah) and gave her hope that we would not be sold because I had a plan in mind. We never knew what was happening outside the gates of this house but the constant sound of airplanes hovering and shooting missiles killing thousands of ISIS men was a sign of hope for us. One day I went to prepare a cup of sweetened tea for Sarah but as I waited for the water to boil, I was knocked to the wall; banging my head then bouncing back, and immediately falling to the ground. The entire house was shaking; a bomb was dropped causing an explosion in a nearby building. We were all happy because we knew that the war was raging and that we will finally have someone coming to rescue us. I told the ladies we have to do something and at this point Saarah and I decided to slaughter the guard and that way we can all escape. My plan was soon aborted by one of the girls who we discovered was a spy, she was also Yezidi but she*

*fell in love with one of the Jihadists who promised to free her and so she gave him a daily report about what was going on among the women, a quarrel broke out with this girl that night and I knew I would be punished the next morning but I had to act strong. We were all a family except for this girl. We all supported one another, cried together and laughed together, children played with each other. We lived together for a long time and so we all became a family except for this girl who was just selfish. As much as I hate those memories but there were also sweet memories in the midst of pain, we used to play all night long as we drank sweetened tea. Our children also used to play around us. Those nights were difficult and many women collapsed and wanted to kill themselves, but the company kept us strong and I had hope that Allah will answer my prayer.*

What was certainly remarkable in Sabah's account is the spy-girl. Sabah clearly states that they were all family except this girl who fell in love and married a Jihadi. What is significant here is that this social cohesion was vital for the preservation of the Yezidi identity. This girl who was originally Yezidi has almost given up her identity by falling in love with and marrying a Jihadi but the women needed each other to maintain their Yezidi identity vis-a-vis their non-Yezidi enemy. The story of the spy-girl is very much aligned with a point that Das (2007) makes in relation to witnessing betrayal during communal riots; violence solidifies group membership at one level, but also has the capacity to break relationships at another level.

### **The Escape: buying your way out**

In the majority of cases where girls were able to escape it was through a middle-man or what is known as a "rescuer". The middle-man had to be a Sunni to be able to freely have access to the Islamic state but it also meant he received a lot of money. There were different stories of how enslaved girls were released, in some cases the girls managed to escape on their own while being

moved to different locations. The most popular escape scenario was via the wealthy Saudi, Sunni Business-man who paid ISIS a huge amount of money for the release of many girls who were sent back to their families. Sometimes, families were able to buy their daughters directly from ISIS when they were sold on the internet but not many Yezidis could afford to do so and those who had several girls in captivity could not borrow such huge amounts of money but it must be noted that a lot of times ISIS contacted the families of the girls when they wanted to get rid of them. I did witness one case where a slave victim was put on sale and ISIS contacted her family on face-book but at the time they wanted a thousand dollars for her release which the family could not afford.

In the case of the five women, a middle-man was used to free Alhna, Sabah and Gulee. Sahar and Hayat escaped on foot when the army opened the way from the mountain to Syria. It is worth noting that although Anhar was not held captive, the fact that they remained in Sinjar which was now under the Islamic state meant that they needed a rescuer to take them out.

Anhar describes the details of how she, her mother and her sister managed to escape out of Sinjar after ten days of hiding in their house.

*During those days I was in close communication with my brother in Germany. My brother was working hard on finding a paid smuggler who could take us out of the city, but we waited not knowing if this will happen or not. We thanked God each day that passed but we were expecting the worse each day that followed. I was never a religious girl and I still don't consider myself religious, but I feel very grateful that the three of us survived. We knew from our brother that there was no one left in Sinjar, they were either killed or had escaped. Finally, after ten days had passed our brother called and he had news that someone will come to take us out. We waited all night for this person to arrive. It was at*

3:00 am when he finally came. He was a Sunni from Erbil and my brother had paid him enough money to make sure that he will take us out of Shingal and not sell us to ISIS or to a second broker. Each of us wore a niqab and covered herself from head to toe so that we would look like Muslim women of the caliphate. We had to throw away our Identity Cards so that if they stop us in the checkpoints there would be no proof that we were Yezidi. We also spoke Arabic very well which meant that we could easily pass as Arabs. Only the rescuer had to keep his ID, which clearly showed that he was Sunni. Driving out of the city was not an easy task. The city was completely desolate, there was nothing left from what we knew was Sinjar. There were rivers of blood and corpses everywhere; those who were found hiding or injured were immediately killed. It looked like it was the end of the world. The plants were dead, there were no people left, and houses were destroyed or taken over by ISIS. As we drove through the city our hearts were torn at the sight of prevailing destruction and the smell of death that filled the air. At times we had to change routes because there were a lot of corpses on the ground that we couldn't make our way through. My mother broke into tears but we calmed her down because we had to appear composed. We stopped at three checkpoints, with each stop our hearts trembled. We were asked every time if we were Muslim and we responded by nodding, but they only checked the driver's ID. The driver would explain every time that we were all family, and it was enough for them to see the ID of the male and verify that he was a Muslim. The first checkpoint was the most difficult for us because we were just frightened, then the second was more tolerable, the third checkpoint was a matter of life or death because we were so close to reaching Dohuk but it could all end in a minute. The moment we stepped out of their territory we were unable to even react but as we reached Dohuk, the three of us threw



*away the Niqab out of the window and we kept the windows open to inhale some fresh air which we had been deprived of for so long, we wept hysterically. We couldn't believe that we were alive, we just couldn't believe it.*

In Gulee's story the middle-man happened to be a friend of her brother, whom they knew back in Sinjar, this middle-man was now working as a mediator between the Islamic state and the local market.

*One time, while the night guards were eating and playing at night, a man had come to join their company. I was shocked to see that this man was a friend of my brother. He was a Sunni neighbor living in Sinjar. There were Muslims and Christians in Sinjar not just Yezidis but most of them had left. I was shocked to see that this man who knew us well and was a friend of my brother could be related to ISIS. I learnt that he was a middleman who sold girls to brokers either online or by taking them to local markets mainly in Syria. I knew that this man could be a source of help but I first had to find a way to speak to my family and I was able to do so through one of the Yezidi girls who was previously in captivity but was now married to one of the guards. A week passed and nothing happened. I assumed that my family did not have enough money to pay, or that the man did not agree to help them. A few days later, I was taken by one of the guards who dragged me all the way to another room, I thought that this was my end, but I was put on the phone with a smuggler who said that will be taking me out. I was going to escape out of the house wearing a Niqab at midnight and he was going to meet me in a specific location. I did not know the date or the time, so I had to be ready every night until I was finally set free.*

In Sabah's story, just when there was hope that they would soon be released as the war on ISIS escalated and Sabah and the other women had made a plan to kill the guard, their plan was soon disrupted by a spy-girl who revealed the women's intention to kill the guard.

*The next morning, I was ordered to meet the Wali, two men came and dragged me to his place. He was A Saudi Wali , his name was Ibrahim EL-Gasrawy, I had never seen a beast before but he was surely one. He was extremely huge, when he stood up I realized how tall he was, I only reached his waist and had to raise my head to speak to him, which was extremely provocative because as a slave girl I was not allowed to look at my master. He raged and bounced his stick up and down; it was a wooden stick with nails on every side. I couldn't look at his face for long not because I was scared but I was disgusted by his appearance. He had a bold head and had a long, brown-reddish beard that reached his chest. His wild eyes searched me up and down like a beast would search his prey.*

*"Give me your money and gold and I will free you", he said.*

*"I have no money or gold, we are all women and children and we have nothing."*

*"Then we will have you."*

*The weight of his spank fell on my face like an avalanche. I couldn't breathe from the pain but I insisted on keeping myself strong. I couldn't feel my body; there is a point in pain where you can no longer feel. The next thing I remember was that I was lifted up and thrown to the wall, I could feel the ache of every bone as my body landed on the wall. I could see the shadow of his monstrous body as he drew closer and closer squeezing my body to the wall, pressing his body against mine and ripping my shirt in half.*

*"One day our men will do the same to your women." I said.*

*Wali El-Gasrawy did not remain in the welaya for long; he was soon replaced by a new Wali, Abu-Mariam. Abu-Mariam was a devout Saudi man, as much as he wanted to bring back a Muslim caliphate he was not like the others, he did not treat women like slaves and did not allow any of the guards to beat or harass us. He refused to touch any woman and more importantly he brought medication, particularly when the children got sick.*

*During that time, they took us to another house in Rekka, along the way I could see trees surrounding us from every side it was like a rainforest. Helicopters were raiding ones again and some women managed to escape but not from the truck I was in. I was too weak and injured to even move. The rest of us were placed in a prison cell in the basement, we stayed there for almost six months. One night a fire broke out in the house, we don't know what the cause was but it took them a long time until they took us out of the prison. I don't recall what happened to me but I recall that I found myself in the hospital and woke up to find Sarah and another woman as well as my children surrounding me. I immediately took Rashad from Sarah and embraced my children until we were interrupted by a visitor. Abu-Mariam came to check on me, I wasn't surprised by his visit because he was kind to all the women but I knew that he particularly favored me because I was always bold and dared to speak up for other women. That day on the hospital bed, I begged him if I could speak to my family and he agreed.*

*That night I received another visitor at night, he was a Daeshi but a middleman. He was one of those militants who agreed to free women for money. He did not say much but he told me that Seifallah was shot and killed by Kurdish forces and that he will arrange to have me sent to the "rescuers". The rescuers were Dawaesh who were willing to send girls back to their families for a huge amount of money and they negotiated those deals*

*through facebook. The man left me a khimar and disappeared but told me to be ready any minute and told me not to tell any woman or else I and the children will be killed.*

*I was happy to hear that Seifallah was killed as much as I was happy to know that I will soon return back to my husband. I put on the Khimar and waited until I was taken from the hospital at 3:00am. I really did not know what will happen to me or the children but this was my only hope. They took me to a secret place in an underground hall, it was like those secret meetings you see in films, with hidden doors that looked like walls surrounding the area where a few militants stayed all night laughing and chatting and watching video tapes of women they had kept. They all looked scary; I had never seen men of such sizes in my life. I was ordered to take off the Khimar so that they could videotape me and send the video to my husband. After the video-recording I was again threatened that I would be killed if I told any of the women. They asked a few things about my husband and also asked for his number. We still had to wait for another month, I did not know what was going on but I knew that this was a time of negotiation. Each day women and children were being taken with no return. A new guard came and to my surprise he was a Muslim neighbor I knew from our village, I begged him not to take Ali because I knew they wanted to train many young boys to kill and Ali had reached the age where he could be trained to kill. At the end of the month I and the children were freed, I was told that my husband had agreed to pay all the money they had asked for and we were ready to go home. It was a difficult journey back home with lots of fighting between ISIS and Kurdish fighters but we finally arrived, it was not the home we once lived in but we were back together.*

**Victim, perpetrator or human**

When hearing any story and particularly that of mass atrocity there is always a strong desire in us to keep two separate blocks of victims and perpetrators, good and evil, friend or foe. While this natural inclination to use this binary scheme is justified, it remains a simplification because most of life happens in what Primo Levi (1986) calls “the gray zone”. This gray zone is not inhabited with heroes and villains or the drowned and the saved but of human beings like the spy-girl in Sabah’s account like the change of governors in Sabah’s story from Wali El-Gassrawy to Abu-Mariam. As hard as it to believe that anything good could come out of ISIS, there was however one good Wali who did no harm to the women and showed kindness to them. Abu-Mariam was a strong believer that there needs to be an Islamic caliphate following Shariah law, nevertheless he did not believe in the rape, humiliation or abuse of women. Those two examples show the diversity that exists within the Islamic state and how the war project could take different faces. It is much easier for one to believe that all those who join ISIS are brainwashed, heartless beasts than to think of the different possibilities that could motivate people to join ISIS. When asked about his experience with Nazi guards, Primo Levi an Auschwitz survivor explains the following:

“...we are asked by the young who our “torturers” were, of what cloth were they made. The term torturer alludes to our ex-guardians, the SS, and is in my opinion inappropriate: it brings to mind twisted individuals, ill born, sadists afflicted by an original flaw. Instead they were made of the same cloth as we, they were average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked...they were not monsters, they had our faces but they had been reared badly. They were for the greater part diligent followers and functionaries, some fanatically convinced of the Nazi doctrine, many indifferent, or fearful of punishment or desirous of a good career, or too obedient.

The same is true of ISIS followers, shockingly they were also average human beings made of the same cloth but diligent followers of a fanatic ideology. The role of the middle-man is also highly debatable. Where do we position a middle-man in relation to the Islamic State? Are they working for ISIS? Are they rescuers in the heroic sense? Or are they after money? From the different conversations I had with different Yezidis, I reached a conclusion that it is difficult to generalize

the role of the middle-man. In Gulee's story, we see that Gulee was shocked to find out that her brother's friend had joined ISIS but we also know that he acted as a middle-man which also entails helping Yezidi families reach their daughters in some cases. It becomes clear that in many cases Middle-men were not following ISIS on the basis of principle but it was a question of money. Accordingly they served either side depending on which side was willing to pay more which also meant that they ended up helping many families buy their daughters. This was also true of Levi's experience in the Lagers. The networks of human relationships in the lagers were not simple and could not be reduced to the two blocks of victims and perpetrators, writes Levi (Levi, 1986). This gray zone was inhabited mostly by victims and collaborators who made certain compromises with varying degrees of free will in exchange of preferential treatment (Levi, 1986).

This gray zone was also valid for my five interlocutors (and myself) "...the enemy was all around but also inside" (Levi, 1986). The accounts narrated previously may present an image of these women being saint-like, but there was a different side of their humanity that may have not been said in words but shown. That is not to say that they were not victims or that ISIS were not responsible for the crimes but the truth is that like any human being there were also shades of grey inside each one of them. Levi breaks this reductionist view of the victim by stating that they all had stolen from "the other", they may have done so to curb their hunger but it was theft nevertheless (Levi, 1986). It was almost unimaginable to think that the petite victim Sabah could think of murder and it may be seen as a justified act of self-defense but it was murder nevertheless. Hayat was very keen on presenting her case to the world outside but that also came with fulfilling her own personal ambition and receiving enough support for her N.G.O. Equally, I may have been moved by the stories of the women and strongly believe in voicing their stories but in doing so, I

have also used those women to get a story, opened their wounds and used their pain to get a project done. The point is that the enemy is not just outside but also within.

The fact that each woman managed to escape or buy herself out may seem like a happy ending to the story. The truth is that this was just the beginning of another story of what it is like to live as a refugee in the aftermath of the genocide. The difference between fiction and writing life stories is that in fiction there is always an end to the story, be it happy or sad the fact that the story comes to a conclusion is in itself a relief, in reality however this is not the case. It is true that the women no longer have to survive the threat of ISIS but they do have to face new challenges, challenges that continue until this present day. Reflecting on this aspect, Levi explains that in the majority of cases, the hour of liberation was neither lighthearted nor joyful because it was often accompanied by the problems of a life to begin all over again against a tragic background of loss and suffering. Leaving pain behind was a delight for only a short while for a few people but for the majority, coming out of the darkness was accompanied by the pain of the reacquired consciousness of having been demolished(Levi,1986).

The following chapter examines the lives of these women in the aftermath of the genocide. It should well be noted that the end of genocide also marks the beginning of another difficult phase of living as a refugee. This phase is not marked by the threat of death and rape but the complexity of adjusting to new surrounds and reclaiming one's life while dealing with loss and separation. The chapter examines the lives of the women through the lens of the refugee problem. The refugee is often presented as either a threat to security challenging the boundaries of the nation-state or a traumatized victim in need of intervention, a product of the trauma-focused approach that has marked our era.

## **Epilogue**

### **The Aftermath**

#### **Challenges to the Kurdish region**

According to a household survey conducted in 2015, an estimated 3,100 Yezidis were killed during the events of 2014. Nearly half of those killed were executed – either shot, beheaded, or burned (Cetorelli et al, 2017). The rest died on Mount Sinjar from dehydration, starvation or injuries during the ISIS siege. The survey results show that while all Yezidis were targeted regardless of age and sex children were the most affected, constituting 93% of those who died on Mount Sinjar (Cetorelli et al, 2017). There are no reliable statistics on the number of displaced persons living in Kurdistan, but the Kurdish regional government claims that 250,000 people fled



from Syria and two million people have fled from ISIS from other parts of Iraq, including 3000,000 Yazidis and 100,000 Assyrians (Frantzman, 2016).

The current refugee crisis adds a lot of pressure on the region's infrastructure and economic stability and has changed the demographics of the Kurdish region, with refugees making as much as 35percent of the population (Frantzman, 2016). This poses serious challenges on a region that was attempting to recover from various challenges under Saddam and the post 2003 era. The majority of the displaced population has not welcomed the idea of returning back to Sinjar. Although, several families have returned after liberation, the majority still fears the threat of Sunni extremism choosing to stay in Dohuk (Frantzman, 2016). According to a comparative analysis of camp and non-camp refugee populations done by the UNHCR in 2015, while 95% of refugees in camps reported being able to afford the cost of meeting their basic needs, 70 % of refugees living outside camps are finding it hard to find the necessary resources to cover their basic needs (World Bank, 2015). Nevertheless, the entire Yezidi displaced population is facing several challenges on many fronts that have made the need for local and international intervention a necessity.



During a visit to a family in camp Khanki, the children were happy to receive some toys. None of the children had shoes to wear for two years.



This young girl survived two weeks in the mountain with her mother. Her father was dead and her brother experienced a severe trauma that left him unable to communicate with anyone.



This is what a typical shelter looks like, the covering material makes it difficult to survive the harsh winter conditions of Kurdistan and the fact that there is no electricity makes it extremely difficult to survive the summer's heat.





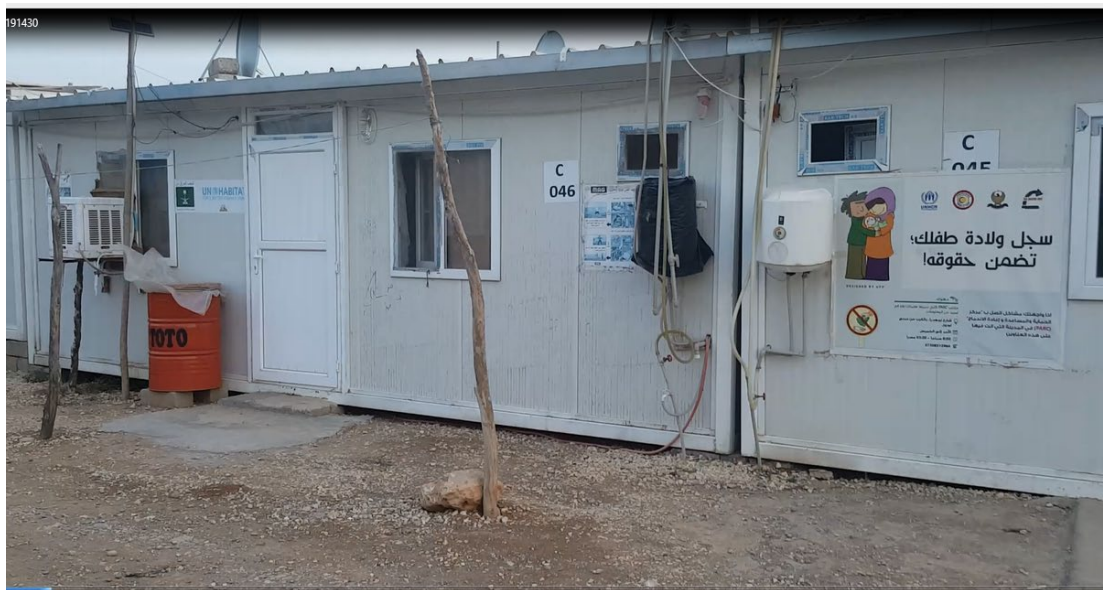
This picture taken in camp Be'adra shows how the community is being rebuilt in the aftermath of the 2014 genocide, with different services created by Yezidis to serve other members in the community. The white tent is a barber shop and the blue one next to it is a photographer and a copy center.



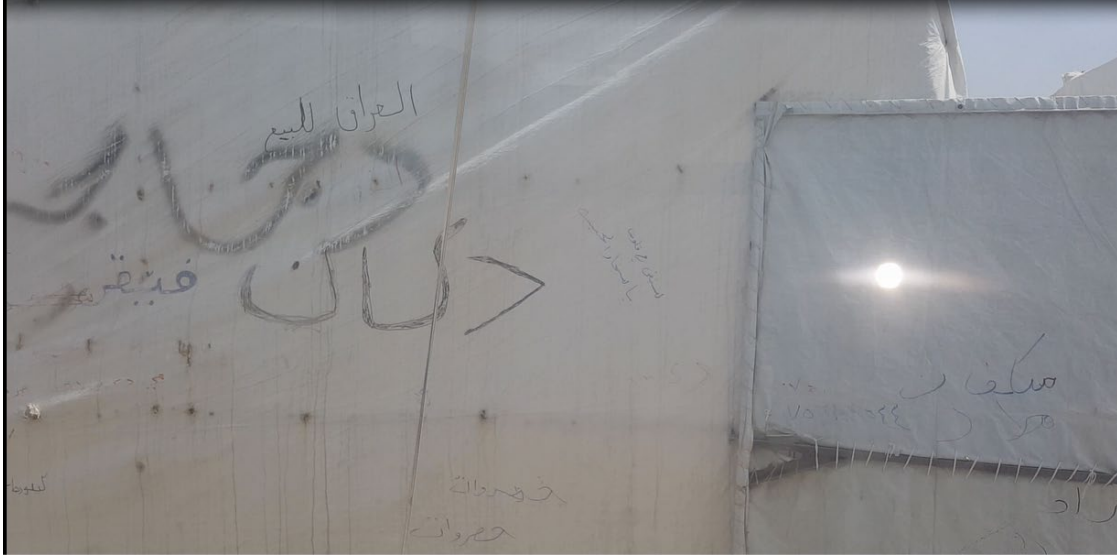
This is both a cafeteria and a grocery store inside one of the camps.



This picture was taken in Camp Shariah. This type of shelter is usually referred to as a “caravan” and is owned by the richer Yezidis. The right side of the shelter reads “Shingal- Sinjar 3/8/2014” – the date of the Siege of Sinjar.



This picture taken in camp Shariah is UN property. The advert on the right calls for the registration of new born children to guarantee their rights.



This is an image of a grocery store in Camp Be'adraa, the hand-writing at the top reads "Iraq for Sale".

### **The Refugee problem: a threat to security**

The most remarkable aspect in the literature on refugees is that more often than not, the problem is presented not in the political crisis or violence that induced massive displacement of human beings but rather within the minds and bodies of people who are classified as refugees (Malkki, 1995). Turner (1967) suggests that "transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere and are at the very least betwixt and between all the recognized fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification." The refugee problem is not only interpreted as a problem of economics or resources but refugees are seen as an issue of security as they blur national boundaries and challenge distinctions between foreigners and nationals (Malkki, 1995).

In the Yezidi situation, while the issue of national security may have affected those who have sought asylum in other countries, this was not the case with the Yezidis I met in Dohuk as these are classified as internally displaced. However, for reasons related to how historically marginalized Yezidis were and the recognition both by themselves and others that they are a

distinct people group, the differentiation between Yezidi Kurds and Muslim Kurds was present. The walls of the refugee camp became an embodiment of this distinction from the other, identifying the difference between a Yezidi and non-Yezidi. Although some Yezidis were not living in refugee camps, the encampment of the majority of Yezidis was significant in constructing and reconstructing the identity. As Liisa Malkki (1995) notes in her study of Hutu refugees, the camp served as the most central place from which to imagine a pure Hutu identity and a historical trajectory of a nation in exile facing trials and tribulations that would ultimately empower them to claim the “homeland” in Brundi. The same was true for most Yezidis, the camp became the social and political space to construct and emphasize the identity of Yezidis as a historically persecuted group and the rightful inhabitants of Sinjar, the place where Yezidism was founded.

It must be noted however, that the refugee problem is rather a problem of the artificial construct of the nation-state. The crisis that the refugee creates by disrupting the order of the nation-state lies in the breaking of the identity between the human and the citizen, nationality and nativity bringing the concept of sovereignty to crisis (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Sovereignty is built on the idea that birth within a particular nation makes the subject a sovereign being, the refugee on the other hand, no longer shares the sovereignty of the country of origin nor the country of destination (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). This becomes even more crucial when discussing a country like Iraq, as revealed in chapter one, sectarian antagonism was introduced by colonial powers from the moment the nation-state was conceived. The majority of theories on sectarianism have attributed intercommunal relationships to cultural difference, but seldom has the nation-state been used as a unit of analysis, although it is the framework within which intercommunal relations happen. Discourses of modernity refused ancient frameworks that were seen as backward and irrational and the nation state was proposed as the solution that would bring forth peaceful

coexistence and would solve economic and political ills (Shihade, 2009). In reality however, this was far from the truth. This is of crucial importance when discussing the future of Iraq because rather than assuming that the ills of Iraq are due to the sectarian nature of the country, one must analyze the contextual factors within the nation-state that fueled sectarian cleavages. Identity, be it sectarian or any other form of identity is not a fixed, permanent reality but it is constantly fluctuating and evolving depending on the context (Haddad, 2011). As Fannar Haddad puts it, terms such as sectarianism or sectarian identity defy formulaic generalizations; contextual factors such as the sociopolitical and economic conditions at a given time must be first taken into consideration before making an assumption about sectarian harmony or disunity (Haddad, 2011).

As Volkan (1998) depicts it; most of us are involuntarily unaware of our breathing but only when we contract ammonia, we suddenly become aware of every breath. When there is a perceived threat on one's identity, those layers of economic and political factors may trigger sectarian sentiments that would otherwise have been dormant. Looking at communal Lebanon, Ussama Makdisi (2000) explains sectarianism as the product of a series of processes through which "religious heritage becomes the primary marker of modern political identity". What brought a legacy of Sectarianism into existence was neither an upsurge of primordial religious solidarities nor was it a traditional reaction to efforts of reform, sectarianism was rather actively produced resulting in an environment of religious differentiation that according to Makdisi didn't exist before. The point that Makdisi makes is that if sectarianism is produced it can also be reversed.

What happened in Iraq is that the American invasion of 2003 resulted in is a sharp deterioration from sectarian coexistence to sectarian violence due to the consistent institutionalization of identity politics. Sectarian identity, in and of itself, became the explicit cause of exceeding violence (Haddad, 2013). Minority groups which formed 5% of the total population



were experiencing significant threats following 2003, where they would comprise more than 20% of the displaced population in Iraq (Lamani & Momani, 2010). 80% of Mandeans and 60% of Christians were either displaced or were forced to flee. According to the UNHCR, 4.5 million Iraqis were refugees at the beginning of 2008, and 2.3 million and 2.2 million were internally and externally displaced. This meant that one of every seven Iraqis was likely to be subject to displacement (Lamani & Momani, 2010). The current refugee crisis therefore is to be seen as a continuation of deteriorating sectarian relations that started since 2003. That does not mean that sectarianism did not exist prior to 2003, but what happened since the American invasion is that sectarian identity has taken a life of its own, becoming unanimously the primary marker of Iraqi politics.

### **The Refugee problem: traumatized victims**

Another important aspect of the refugee problem lies within the political image of the refugee as a traumatized victim in need of intervention. The twentieth century institutionalized assistance to refugees for the dual purpose of safeguarding nation-states from the potential threat of refugees while protecting the increasing number of victims' subject to violence and persecution (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). The idea that war-torn societies are "traumatized" and require therapeutic management for the community to be able to move forward has gained special attention since the political tension in South-Africa (Moon, 2009). This assumption goes back to the First World War where the concept of "shell shock" was used to treat soldiers who have experienced horrific conditions of trench warfare. This was the initial point of recognizing and medicalizing emotional and psychological reactions to war. After that, came the Vietnam War, which led to the emergence of the trauma rubric, "posttraumatic stress disorder" (PTSD in relation to a range of psychological and emotional symptoms that veterans returning from Vietnam experienced. During the era of the "new wars" of the 1980s and 1990s, this concept of traumatized societies is further

developed to include entire civilian populations and not just combatants (Moon, 2009). The ideological revolution that came as a byproduct of the concept of trauma has changed the status of wounded soldiers, survivors of accidents and individuals hit by misfortune from that of a suspect as it has always been portrayed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to that of a legitimate victim (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). The overlap between trauma and exile became a very significant aspect of this institutionalized assistance, because trauma became an essential component in the administration of proof upon which the refugee can receive assistance (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

Accordingly, trauma also evolved from being a medical concept to become a political category. One can say that the genealogy of trauma is therefore dual, not only has trauma evolved in the medical and psychiatric field but also as a political category, in an anthropological sense, in terms of how victims are recognized and how journalists, lawyers, humanitarian and support groups intervene with the traumatized victim (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). However, the problems of this image of the traumatized refugee are multifold and deserve further scrutiny. On one level, following Young (1997) it must be noted that the disorder is a historic product that is neither timeless nor possesses an intrinsic unit but is put together by the practices, technologies and narratives of various interest groups and organizations that mobilize these efforts (Young, 1997). The role of medical experts and psychologists has significantly evolved from previously being care givers to the ones responsible for administering proof and legitimating the refugee experience. On a different level, although in principal the concept of trauma is seen as universal, the politicization of trauma reveals discrepancies in the practice of human psychiatry in the treatment of victims depending on whether they are Kosovars or Serbs, Armenians and Romanians or Congolese and Liberians (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). More so, the influx of Iraqi and Syrian refugees into Turkey reveals how trauma takes a role in the geopolitical maneuvers of war and

diplomacy (Loyd, Ehrkamp, & Secor, 2017). Turkey has used the moral burden of hosting refugees as a “bargaining chip” with the European Union, which resulted in the EU committing to a financial aid of 3 billion Euros for Turkey and Turkey’s temporary accession to the EU despite its deteriorating human rights record. In exchange of that, Turkey has become the EU’s security agency engaging in both humanitarian and military interventions across the borders (Loyd, Ehrkamp, & Secor, 2017).

The fact that the refugee rather than being an individual has been reduced into a victim category established by medical experts, psychologists and aid workers raises the question of whether or not the refugee identifies with this political representation. On one end of the spectrum, victims of trauma may adopt the only persona that supports their claim for justice – that of victim. In doing so, they are speaking not of who they are but of the moral economies of our age. On the other end, victims may not see themselves as victims; asylum seekers may relate to themselves as political activists, and research shows that Palestinian refugees may see themselves as heroes of a cause rather than victims (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

From a psychological perspective, adopting a trauma-focused approach comes with its own limitations. That is not to undermine or discredit the severity of trauma that refugees have experienced but to highlight the necessity of a holistic and integrative approach in dealing with refugees (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015). A research done in 2015 on the prevalence of PTSD and depression among Yezidi refugees in Iraq shows that the frequency of PTSD was 42.9% and the frequency of depression was 39.5% (Tekin et al, 2015). The rate of PTSD and depression in women refugees was higher than among male refugees. Traumatic events associated with PTSD were identified as “had been in a region that is affected by war, “witnessed the death of a close friend or a family member” and “witnessed the abduction or being taken hostage of a close friend

or a family member” (Tekin et al, 2015). In addition to understanding past traumatic events, it is also significant to understand current stressors that the refugee may be experiencing that may significantly affect their psychological conditions (Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015). Examining a refugee only through the lens of trauma indicators like “had been in a region that is affected by war, “witnessed the death of a close friend or a family member” and “witnessed the abduction or being taken hostage of a close friend or a family member” does not take into consideration important factors that can be affecting the refugee in his present circumstances like displacement, poverty, language barriers or migration of family members.

### **A community for women (YAZNA and The Open Space)**

Since 2014, many international actors and NGOs, have dedicated their efforts in helping Yezidis cope with their post-conflict conditions. This does not only include physical needs like food, clothes and shelter but special attention has been given to their psychological condition. During my fieldwork, I was working with 2 other NGOs that have focused on providing psychological help to survivors, besides the initial NGO I was volunteering with that had established bakeries inside the camps and provided medical supplies as well as other physical needs.

Despite the striking difference between the 2 NGOs I was collaborating with, they both did a great job in the healing process of Yezidi women, particularly those who have returned from captivity. I choose to give pseudonyms to the two NGOs based on the preference of the ladies I worked with. YAZNA was a much more established NGO, located at the heart of Dohuk city. There was a clear structure and a clear hierarchy and it was managed by a highly professional Swedish lady who was in control of the entire workflow. The open Space was certainly more casual and less structured. It was located inside Camp B’adraa and was run by Hayat- a Yezidi

who was herself an inhabitant of the camp but Hayat knew the women well and lived among them. The fact that the 2 NGOs specifically served the female population was remarkable. Women are certainly less privileged in the community even before the crisis broke out. They had to marry at a young age; the majority is uneducated and guided by strict rules and traditions.

In a time when many girls had lost their families, were abandoned by them and many were dealing with severe depression with no job or purpose in life, finding a community to belong to was significant. Not only did it help break the isolation and sense of loneliness those women were living in by connecting them to other women in the community, but it also helped them articulate their feelings and find practical ways to deal with their trauma. The fact that these women interacted with each other gave them a motive to fight for each other and encouraged them to press on.

One of the distinctive aspects in The Open Space was the fact that the women were engaged in sessions that helped them learn new skills and become more productive in society. Many of the women were learning how to read and write for the first time, others were learning how to sew clothes and the majority was learning Arabic. The beauty salon was an exceptional feature because it gave women a chance to do the things that they enjoyed doing but were considered a luxury given the fact that they were refugees living in a camp and cannot afford the basic things in life. The fact that the beauty salon was not confined to a room or a covered area was highly empowering because it meant that these women can do what they like even if people were passing by and watching them.



The ladies of Camp B'adraa during a Tuesday gathering in the beauty salon.

### **Moving on: the importance of religion**

How do people and communities move on, after they have survived and continue to survive such traumatic experiences? The idea of healing post-conflict societies has gained political credence in the last few decades. Lumsden (1997) argues that in order to break cycles of violence, postwar social rehabilitation must work on reconciling the “outer world” with the “inner world” to overcome the impact of trauma. Staub, Pearlman, Gubin, & Hagengimana (2005) highlight that in order to heal, members of victimized groups must engage with their pain, re-experience the sorrow under safe conditions and must in return receive empathy and support from each other and also from people outside their group. The authors emphasize the importance of creating processes that promote healing for the wider society, this includes ceremonies, memorials and testimonials where people can engage with their experiences and connect with one another in ways that point

to a more hopeful future rather than reinforce woundedness (Staub, Pearlman, Gubin, & Hagengimana, 2005).

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl sheds light to the importance of finding meaning in suffering by recounting his own experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. For Frankl, even in the midst of suffering people have the freedom of will to choose who they become as human beings. Despite all the challenges of living in a concentration camp, Frankl asserts that it was possible for spiritual life to deepen (Frankl, 1946). For the majority of the Yezidis I met, faith in God was the key to endure their suffering. God, a greater supreme, omniscient, sovereign and omnipresent was the source of meaning for them. In Yezidism, there was no devil or any source of evil, everything was dictated and ordained by God. I was told by Sahar's mother that what happened was all God's will. During a visit to Sahar, I was told by Sahar's mother that "In Yezidism good and evil are from God, and that's why we fear the devil because he controls life after God, the devil repented after falling and he was forgiven and was ordained to rule the earth." Hayat, on the other hand believed that "even God does not accept what ISIS are doing". Despite the differing views and varying degrees of piety all the women and all the Yezidis I met believed in the existence of God. For them, the God of Yezidism was also the God of Muslims and Christians alike. According to the women, there were different paths called religions but it all led to one God. Yezidis had great pride in believing that they are the most ancient people group as descendants of Mesopotamia and so their faith was much older than Christianity, Judaism and Islam. All the ladies attributed their survival to God who responded to their prayers because he had written that in their fate. Sabah recounts that she had prayed for one of the guards to die because she abhorred him and the next day he died during a raid, this was because she knew that God answered all her prayers since childhood when he saved her from her step-mother. It was

allah sob7anoh wa ta3ala who saved her and her children. Gulee also recounts that it was God who made a way for her to escape, “It was only because God wanted me to live and he saw the agony I was in.” She was so grateful to God that she felt she must pay back by helping out others in her community and the best way to honor God for saving her was to become a doctor.

Hayat who once made a statement that even God does not accept what is done to Yezidis, in a different occasion she explained that the siege was a test from God to strengthen her people who were very naïve. God wanted to make them stronger so he allowed them to go through this test but this was not to put them into despair but to strengthen them. Hayat believed that God has placed strength inside every Yezidi and they just had to search within their souls to find this strength. For Sahar, who like her mum knew that this was all God ordained she found comfort in knowing that only God knows and sees what Yezidis had to go through and he was the judge who will avenge and reward them on judgment day. Anhar was not a highly religious and conservative girl, she believed like all Yezidis that all religions lead to God and she highly valued her friendships with Muslims and Christians. Recalling her experience, Anhar was clear that it was God who protected her, her mother and sister and without his protection they would have never made it out of Sinjar.

What seemed obvious was that suffering was a very spiritual experience that could not be experienced or fathomed without relating their experience to God. This was not only true for Yezidi survivors but research on Armenian and Rwandan survivors have also shown that religion was integral to the experience those survivors lived (Miller&Miller,2004). It is faith that helped survivors of the Armenian and Rwandan genocide find a purpose in their suffering and it is faith in God that has helped those women hold on and find meaning in their suffering. Cobban (2007) examines the significant role religion plays in the healing and reconciliation for post-conflict



societies. Cobban points to the struggle of South Africans for equality, explaining that the teachings of Islam, Hinduism and Christianity made distinctive contributions in reinforcing healing of non-white communities. She notes that, although the majority of liberal-western governments abstain from the role of religion especially when religion is usually the cause of many conflicts, case-studies from Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa show the significance of religious ideas and institutions (Cobban, 2007). The extreme and multi-layered levels of vulnerabilities that post-conflict societies go through makes the role of religion highly significant for the process of peacebuilding (Cobban, 2007). This was also true for most Yezidis I met, religion was important for the role it played in sustaining the individual and holding the community together. Religion was not taken as a dividing factor between Muslims, Yezidis and Christians but as a uniting factor that encouraged love and respect for the other.

I did not realize the importance of religion and Spirituality for Yezidis until I visited the city of Lalish. It is important to note that the Yezidi temple is only found in Sinjar and Lalish which means that the genocide resulted in a huge spiritual separation from their place of worship. Visiting Lalish was therefore a dream for every Yezidi I met. I visited Lalish during a trip organized by Anhar for the ladies receiving help from YAZNA. Accompanying the women in this spiritual journey was not only a very unique experience for me as an outsider. There were two particular moments that were the highlight of the trip; the first was when all the women gathered around the pillars inside the temple and tried to untie the knots. I was told that pilgrims are means to untie the knots in the cloth to have their prayers answered. It was interesting that for hours these women did not speak or interact with anyone but as soon as they reached those pillars there was suddenly a thunder of prayers as they determinedly untied those knots. The silence resumed again until we reached an inner room in the temple. This was an inner chamber that only Yezidis can

enter so I watched from a distance. There was a stream of water in this inner chamber, I was told that if you were praying for the return of a loved one you need to put your feet in the water and start kicking your feet to have your prayers answered. Once again all the women rushed to the stream as they prayed for the return of those in captivity. It was a highly emotional and spiritual moment for the women but all of them expressed how soothing and significant their experience was.

The use of symbolic resources and in this case pilgrimage to Lalish is significant in sustaining and helping individuals and communities experiencing chaos move through a transitional phase. In such situations when people lose the common ground, the taken for granted, they attempt to construct meaning through the use of symbolic elements: “that is, in shared concrete things, or some socially stabilized patterns of interaction or customs that encapsulate meanings or experiences for people (Zittoun et al, 2003).



The holy city of Lalish is where the Yezidi temple is located



The black serpent, an important symbol of Yezidi faith found at the entrance of the temple.





Inside the temple in Lalish.



As part of the Yezidi prayer rituals, you have to untie those knots to have her prayer answered.

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